

THE
VELVET
HORN

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The Velvet Horn

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BEDFORD FORREST AND HIS CRITTER COMPANY

THE LONG NIGHT

AT THE MOON'S INN

A NAME FOR EVIL

The Velvet Horn

BY ANDREW LYTLE



McDowell, Obolensky / New York

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Evigs Pauline. To Mam 11-7-63

To John Crowe Ransom

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The Peaks of Laurel

Sol Leatherbury, the woods boss, speaks:

The tree.

The tree fell

Fell and killed Captain Joe Cree.

It waer a white oak. The widow had as good a stand of timber as growed, but hit topped aer tree she had. Hit was the line tree. It had stood from the time of man. It taken all evening to thow it. I told him it would not pay. I've cut a sight of timber in my time. I used around a sawmill ever since I was a shirt-tail boy, but mostly I like to fall trees. I can thow a tree whur I want it. Hit'll not pay you, I said. I can thow it clear but it'll not pay you. The butt cut is too big for the carriage. The other cuts will saw slow. They will be slow to load and slow to haul. But he would have it, and the time running out and half the timber still to cut. I could a thowed three trees the time hit taken. But he would have it.

I did not dispute more. When his mind waer set you did not dispute Captain Cree. That's mostly what I liked about him. He did not waste time. Naer a man did I see could move a crew faster. He could pick up a crew of men and set them down a mile away and no slack to take up. It pleased me to see it. I taken my sights and back-cut the butt and give the word, like he had give the word to me. I do not dispute the man who pays me Saturday evening. I do not tell a man his business. It was a mistake, but no miss-take of mine. I sent for bigger wedges. I put one man to file. I drew two men from another crew for to spell, so the saw would not idle. I calculated well, but I did not calculate on Captain Cree. My hand hit laid to the anvil. Midways I had had to wedge with the snout

of an anvil. I stood ready to clear the saw. Once in my green days I tangled a saw. Not aer a time since have I done it.

The dust piled up like young horns. Each stroke brought sweat but no man white-eyed on me. I stood ready to give the word, which way to clear, the way I already knowed. I felt the butt lighten on the anvil but I did not give it. I sighted up the long trunk to the branches. I could not see its end, but I heard it. The crack. I drawed back and give the word. The boys did not tarry, but they made no haste. That white oak groaned. Hit popped so easy. The top shook itself and leaned outwards. It leaned by inches, like it wanted to idle to the ground. Like it knowed what it would do. Like it waited for him. But I knowed better. It waer the balance made it slow to fall. It had growed to its own balance.

I seen Captain Cree too late. I sighted with my eye and seen him and the tree would tangle. I hollered. He taken no notice. He walked, as ever, with a prancing gait. He walked with his chin drawed in, broke to the collar yoke. He walked like that tree would be proud to git out of his way. But that white oak did not git out of his way.

The tree killed Captain Cree.

The tree.

The sun barely tipped the Peaks of Laurel. The sky was a shimmering of the air. For an instant longer night stained the cove which ran back to the foot of the Peaks; then from the small window in the garret of the tollgate Lucius Cree saw the field of corn reappear by the pike as if for his eyes alone. Streamers of mist lay among the tassels. The top of the field was a bleached green. A Dominecker hen, flicking her neck, stepped secretly through the brown grass of the side yard. The boy moved forward into the vibrant stillness, and the cool air met his naked body with the shock of a poultice. He paused wonderingly and in the hazy light witnessed the miracle of his being. He touched his chest lightly, in fresh discovery, and his sweaty skin shivered under the fingers in their downward travel. "I can be anything I want," he whispered, but the words died into sound, as his arms thrust suddenly upward and stretched and the taste of moisture was on his tongue.

He let his eyes half close to prolong this exquisite knowledge of himself; but even as the well windlass creaked from below, the elation drained out of him. He willed his lids to stay shut a while longer, until a screeking dry scream of the chain scraped like a rasp. All his rawness shivered in one tight spasm; then he felt the warm blood ease the chill of his flesh. He was looking out into a silence. Almost he could hear the dripping bucket rest on the well cover. Then the snores from the bed cut up the quiet in uneven parts. The morning showed the ruin the drought had made of the field of corn. In the freshening day the fired stalks had seemed an uplift of the ground, but now the rows of corn showed gray with pike

dust and smutty ears thrust upwards, swollen among the sharp and twisted blades and the swollen grain bursting through the shuck like rotten teeth.

But the drought would pass. The elation he had felt a moment ago would last. In all its mystery it remained like a promise fulfilled. Today they would climb the Peaks to witch a well. Suddenly this too seemed more than a common necessity. He saw this as part of the mystery, that a man could take a forked switch and find water underground. Not any man. You had to have the gift. And his Uncle Jack had it. He must get him out of bed.

He turned back into the room, towards the bed where the large man lay spread-eagled upon the shuck mattress. The night heat had not abated. It stuffed the attic. It encased him like a fevered skin, soaking up his uncle's whiskey sweat and breath. Lucius looked down upon his kinsman. The long cotton underwear was open to the navel. The hair grew out of the dark roots, bristling up his belly to branch out upon the chest in thick curly mats. Tenderly Lucius felt his own smooth chest. It was immaculate, and he turning eighteen, a man with all but the proof. Well, he was ready for that now. He stood quietly by the bed, breathing out against the offensive odors. To think that this man, Jack Croleigh, was his mother's brother, and she so gentle, yet supple as hickory, carrying her head high like his father. And Jack and his father first cousins, too. How much kin can you be to a man? To look at him now—none, at least in looks. His father, dark, erect, his every movement one of authority. And Jack so full of flesh, almost gross. Going to bed drunk, he guessed, made him seem so, for he was not gross. Just full of flesh. Suddenly it seemed a bad thing, surprising a man in his sleep. He leaned over and shook him. "Wake up, Uncle Jack. Sun up."

Jack Croleigh's breath caught itself; resumed its snorts and puffs. From the room below noises of the household stirring drifted up through the cracks in the floor boards. A little roughly now he shook his uncle, who groaned and struck the air viciously. Lucius jerked back, then smiled. "Wake up, old witch," he said and shook

him again. The rising bell off the ell porch began its jerky ringing. With a lurch Jack swung up and around to the bed's edge, his eyes red and wild. "Fire! Fire!" he gasped.

"That's the rising bell," Lucius said quietly.

And then he laughed. He couldn't help it. Jack who was never out of countenance sat in the nothingness between dreaming and consciousness, his face drawn in the reflection of dream-terror, the eyes glazed and blank. It was only for an instant. As the laughter died, Jack's eyes came to a focus upon his nephew. Slowly and derisively they examined his nudity. "Who do you think you are, the seed tree of the world?"

"Saved by a bell," Lucius said. Too hurriedly. He had meant to speak in a bantering sarcasm. He picked up and stepped into his underwear. "Were you already burning, old witch? Or did the fork have you by the pants just above the flames? Fire! Fire!" He side-glanced his uncle.

Jack was covertly looking about the room. He heaved himself up and stumbled over to the window. Leaning down to see out, he seemed to draw the low ceiling upon his head. Without turning, he asked flatly, "What I'm doing here at old Frankie Dunbaugh's?"

"You're going to witch her a well. Remember?"

"Like hell I am," he said unemphatically.

"Were you so drunk you don't remember when I came to get you?"

Jack bent his great head around, and his long sandy hair in thick strands tangled over his brow, so that his eyes seemed to gleam as out of brush. "I thought you were sawmilling."

"Cousin Frankie asked Papa to send me. She thought, I guess . . ."

"I aint interested in the thoughts of an old dry bitch. What I want to know is what has she got on Joe Cree, he'd send his ewe lamb into the trampled straw of the old ram?"

"You've got your sexes mixed, aint you?" Lucius looked slyly up from buttoning his jeans. "I'm sure I heard her say—You'd better send the boy. He'll fetch the old bell wether."

Jack cleared the hair out of his face and showed the gray-blue eyes so clear and searching, but now a shadow lay behind them. Their usual banter went somehow haltingly. "Where's my jug?" Jack asked abruptly. "I know I didn't leave it behind. I wasn't, I've never been that drunk."

Lucius nodded towards the headboard of the bed. "You don't need any more. We've a hard climb ahead of us. Dress so we can get going before it turns too hot."

"Christ!" Jack Croleigh said. "Christ never spent a hotter three days."

He shook the jug and drank one deep thirsty drink. He shuddered from the waist up and carefully sat back upon the bed as if he feared it might give way beneath him. The shucks gave a low rustle in the tick. His mouth twisted wryly, but the words came out thick and deep: "For forty days the sun sets up there in the sky and licks the ground. Curles the boards in the roof. Draws the nails backwards, and my throat gaping like a chicken's. Will ever the moistures meet again? That's what I want to know." He yawned and scratched his back. "What good is the team between the rows, the dirt puffing about their hocks like snuff and me behind with my hand to the plow and my nose under a wet black mule's ass? Is that a wetness to do a body any good?"

"You mean John Greer's hand is on the plow," Lucius corrected.

"Greer's hand?"

"If you had your season right. This is August. The year, 1879. A time of drought. And what crops there are laid by. Who plows then?"

Jack reached for his jug, drank and belched, wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his underwear. "So Greer's hand is on the plow. But tell me, philosopher, can you tell the master from the man?"

"The negroes been freed."

"Well, I aint."

A slight smile made a shadow on Lucius's face. He could feel it, as he stood with legs apart, dressed now in faded jeans and

faded shirt, the too tight jeans molding his thighs and his shirt open on the fair skin. He felt refreshed and a little hungry, as he egged his uncle on. "You mean from the nipple of the jug?"

"So the niggers been freed?" The older man's voice became courtly. "You can do anything with bayonets, Sire, but sit on them," and he heaved himself up and, holding to the bedpost, thrust his foot at the pant leg. "Who is free of the seasons? If I perish by this drought, I said, we all perish, speaking to myself as I do, living among people whose ears are clogged with dirt and dirt in their eye-sockets. So I hitched old Beck to the spring wagon and loaded the corn and drove the back way, for should I pay toll and taxes too and that to your father and Frankie Dunbaugh and to that plu-perfect bastard, Pete Legrand, for spreading a little gravel and barring the way on God's ground that should be free to all? No, I will take the back way, I said, and all morning I bumped and slid towards the Peaks of Laurel and up its bristling sides the winding way, and broke two spokes in a wheel." He paused and regarded the pant leg which his foot had been missing. "It's not always been I couldn't put a leg in a hole," he said.

Lucius with elaborate courtesy bent his knee. "Allow me, Sire." He guided the leg through and faced his uncle with a mock frown. "Think you can hold your pants up with that baling wire?"

"Never spurn the small gifts of this world, boy. They may bear witness to a miracle."

"This miraculous wire . . ."

"It carried me to the Peaks that day. I bound up the broken spokes with it and old Beck settled in the shafts and we, *mirabile dictu*, came to the very hollow we had aimed for. Some god must have guided us."

"Squatting between the mule's ears?"

Jack twisted the wire tight about his waist. He said very formally, "I see you do not believe in the gods." He beat his chest. "Under this bosom."

"Take care, dear uncle. You'll beat up the game in that brush."

Jack looked down at his open underwear. Carefully, using both

hands, he began to button up. "The bane of this country," he said, "is the eighteenth century. I show you the pure flame of belief. All you see is the natural man. The natural man and a little modest deism. There's a bit any horse can take in his teeth."

The door to the stairwell creaked. A woman's voice called up, "You all git up. Breakfast is on the coals."

"We're up, Cousin Frankie," Lucius called down.

"God damn," Jack said. "Breakfast. It's a marvel how people center everything in the belly. Up or down. And you rising like dawn all naked. You been loping your mule?"

Lucius blushed to the line of his blond hair. Jack, seeing this, raised his voice as if he had been interrupted: "I'm the only man in this river valley lives by the spirit. And there I was yesterday, by divine guidance and baling wire, come to the very spot I had set myself to reach, and my mule Beck recognized it and sighed piously, loosening her belly band, and the three gardeens of the Grove, old Penter Matchem, his boys Raydell and Shack, appeared from nowhere, miraculously, and little Buddy boy of the true line and stock hiding in the rushes. The boys stood there with their rifles and their hair hanging to the knee . . ."

"Why not to the ground?"

"For the poor in spirit I always speak in hyperbole."

"You'd better carry a dictionary then."

Jack raised his hand. "And old Penter with the ball of his hand on the knob of his shittim-wood staff—two places in the world it grows, Palestine and the Peaks of Laurel—with his black hat crowning his head like a fallen angel and saying nary a word. It was then I rose hieratically from my cart and saluted them. —Gentlemen, I said. I've come to practice a little magic with you. I deal in the substance of this world, you its spirits. Here in this wagon is better than two barrels of corn, shucked, shelled and sacked. I'll swap barrels for gallons, and who could fail to gain by such a trade? That is, I said, if it's pure, for I'm the water witch can tell water twenty miles underground. Not rot-gut diluted with what's free for all. And with that patriarchal Penter said, Buddy boy, and

Buddy boy reached through with a fruit jar and the old dried speckled claw held it to the light. There it was, the beads popping airy as angels' piss, and old Penter spoke his first words. Taste of hit. I unscrewed the top and let it run down my gullet. I hoped I might speak again, but down the throats of Penter and the boys it slid like cistern water. We made the swap, and when me and Beck slid back down the Peaks, the wagon rattled so light I thought we would float away, and the jugs bouncing like bladders at Christmas time. Oh, the light load! Yet the same load. Aint that magic, to turn mule corn into water and make it burn like fire? It's one way to banish drought."

He bowed to his uncle; he applauded silently. "You've outdone yourself," he said. "But the fact remains you were so drunk you didn't remember coming here, or why, although I must admit you didn't show it. Or," and Lucius lowered his voice, "are you trying to talk down that dream? Fire! Fire! Fire! What a dream for a water witch."

"It's a dream I dream," Jack said.

By the change of voice but chiefly by the eyes, darker and withdrawn, Lucius felt the change in his uncle, an inner speculation and hesitancy which, as he waited for him to continue, held before them in the little loft room a sense almost of menace, unclear, but for its very lack of clarity the more to be felt. It was as if his uncle knew more than he could say directly. And yet Jack always talked around a thing, circumscribing it, as if by that he could make it show itself more clearly.

"It's about mama and papa blowing up in the steamboat. I dreamt it the night you were born."

"Well?"

"You'll be eighteen tomorrow."

"Again on the eve of my birthday."

"Again."

"Well?"

The eyes Jack cast upon his nephew were of no color, only dark and glistening, whether from the liquor or what Lucius could not

tell, but they held him. "You think you are you," Jack said, "but when you came out of your mother's womb, you also came out of what happened to her and her brothers the day we learned our father and mother went up in fire and smoke. We were all under age. I was eighteen. Beverly a year older, Dickie two years younger. Duncan was closest of all to your mother. He was ten. Julia, your mother, was six. We had gathered in that apprehension which was the air of the room, called in from yard and barn and Julia from playing with her pet squirrel, to be told by Aunt Emm that the steamboat had blown up. She was not your grandmother then, only Aunt Emm Cree saying—Oh, my poor orphans, my poor children, as if they were the only words she knew. And your father, her darling, not yet your father, standing behind her not knowing what to do with himself. We stood scattered about like sheep the dogs been in, Beverly scowling to keep from crying. And there I was, next to the eldest, never thinking of tears for watching, the surrogate who always waits and waiting perforce observes, the second son held in reserve for emergencies. So I alone of us all watched our common plight, never free to immerse myself within myself but outside watching me, too, the blooded stranger among brothers and sister; watching, too, our cousin, Joe Cree, not yet your father . . ."

"You've already said that."

"I'm trying to say that once we had a life free of you. At least we thought we were free of you."

"I must be something. An influence even in the womb." Lucius tried to be nonchalant, but he was a little hurt. And annoyed that Jack paid no attention to his attempt at wit.

"Joe Cree—not yet your father," and Jack paused, "was averting his head from the lace handkerchief twitching at his mother's nose, for could so elegant a lady have so common a thing as a nose? Her tears were all a-waste until Julia looked in at the doorway, alert, like a wild young thing fallen into a trap, not yet knowing, who had not been shown this kind of danger, but in the iris the sense of it growing with the leap which would not free it,

for who is ever free of grief? Then Aunt Emm's arms were about her, the tears at last finding the true object—Oh, you poor little motherless thing . . . Your mother, no not your mother, our six-year-old baby sister, our Julie, crying by contagion the ready tears which was still her most familiar tongue. Duncan, the brother and playmate, a big boy now, ran over blubbering beside her. As if all these tears were stifling him, Joe Cree threw up his head, ran his fingers through his stock and cast these words into the room—Beverly, I'll show you how to grow cotton.

"Aunt Emm was so shocked she forgot to weep. Neat and lithe in his doe-colored pants, the boot shaped to the tireless foot, the negligent stock upon the supple neck, not defiant, merely inarticulate, Joe Cree plainly offered his person for speech. It was a handsome figure he made. I remember not a hair of his black head was out of place. He stood there as if to say: *Death? What have I to do with death? There is only life. Look at me and see it.*"

Lucius interrupted, "I wish I was dark, like papa."

"You are more Croleigh than Cree," Jack said, then raised his hand. "Listen. Beverly turned his pale sharp face. He said quietly—I'll never grow another stalk on this place.

"None of us understood, although I knew these common words about common matters foretold uncommon happenings. But I didn't then see what. We agreed to let Aunt Emm take our little sister to town with her. We decided that night after supper, remote from each other in the formality of our grief. We settled it with that easy decision of the head which never works unless the heart agrees. Later, all together in the boys' room, Beverly and I in our bed, Julia between Dickie and Duncan, with the covered fire blotching the walls and ceiling, I could at last accept what had happened, the blinding flash, the darkness exploding, and afterwards the silence catching its breath over the river. Mama. Papa. Now here. Now nowhere.

"Mama was so gay when they left us to go off and sell the cotton. She already seemed strange at the moment of farewells. I suppose I saw her as herself apart from us. To feel she had a life

free of me gave me a jealous wrench. I must have shown this, for she took my face in her hands. She was very grave and tender.—John, she said, I will miss you. Nobody else ever called me John and Beverly was her favorite, and when she hugged him the last of all, he stood there like a wet lump of sugar trying to keep its shape; and papa impatient to be off saying—The horses are around. It scared me, the look of hatred Beverly gave him. Then she was trying to embrace us all at once, regretful, and for an instant I thought she would not go, but papa had her arm and they passed through the doors in a hurry. They were leaving us, forever . . . Think of this, son. You step out of the door on your business, you may step away forever. Like that. That will curl the hairs on your chest where you aint got none.

“That very thought came to me in the night, and I sat up in bed in fright. The sight of them walking away flashed, exploded rather like that other explosion. Roughly Beverly pulled me back down and settled the quilts about my shoulders and I smelled our bodies staling the feathers of the bed, the odor trapped by the covers released, passing into the chill air of the room, that same air which had so indifferently received our parents upon the instant, the instant become eternity, as they walked the boat deck, staring down upon the slick dark waters, the red tongues from the fire boxes darting over the river like spilled grease. Did they to escape the meaning of that stoking lift their eyes far out, beyond the swirling suck of the river, to the thicker dark, the walled shoreline of night? Or did they pass arm in arm by the ladies’ saloon and hear the tinkling voices beyond the gilt doors, shaken like crystal prisms by the pounding engines already swelling the boilers? Did she say—How beautiful, to the sparks and chips spewing the garlanded mouths of the tall black stacks? Did she follow the sparks spangling the down-blown smoke through which the boat sped? Or did her voice tremble with the shuddering deck and in panic did she sink her head towards the perfumed bosom that she might not smell the scorched paint tainting the cylinders? Was it that that made her lean into our father’s arm and promenade past to the

railing, where the mild breeze from off the water gave her back the foreign scent? And, leaning far out, sighting the furious wheels paddling the hissing foam, did our father think only of the race won as the other boat fell back, a swarm of fireflies withdrawing? Did he say—We are winning, to drown the growing throb which at last and instantly expanded, lifting them together into night air, upon the brilliant plumes of that darkest tree . . . and afterwards the abrupt silence, the few lost cries and the boat burning on the water. Silence burning, had they found the pure water at last? The pure flame? Fire and water fusing in vapor's colors. Did the heart then shake itself with the small thunder of the peacock's tail? Was that a beginning, or an ending?

"Afterwards I slept the sleep that brings the morning and the discovery that Julia and Duncan had run away. It was not hard to track the old brood mare. Children they were and could plan only as children who go to sleep out. The clear trail of innocence, but is the heart ever innocent?"

"The heart is a muscle," Lucius said; and when he said it, he knew it was to break free from his uncle's voice.

"Yes," Jack said, "and the eye is a round ball of jelly. Put them together and you get that old stranglehold called Life is with us every day. Well, Duncan was frying biscuit over coals, the old brood mare like a duenna, stolid and impervious, snipping the wispy November grass. There was a long instant and Beverly increased it with his look. Was he hiding his confusion, his relief at finding them? What was he thinking? That already the family was going to pieces, these children in their flight protesting their love, apart from the rest of us. Did he see us all scattered, and scattered our common love? Perhaps it was I who was thinking this, and Beverly only that these children had shown him the way out. If you won't grow cotton, what else can you do but take to the woods? Growing the lint, weaving the garment, wearing it—is not that the curse put upon us? And had Beverly, knowingly or not, refused it to return from whence we had been driven?"

"Julia was sitting on the ground as if nothing had happened,

giggling because her pet squirrel was trying to hide a nut in her neck yoke. Duncan faced his elder brother, not quite knowing whether to bow to his authority, close to tears, afraid of what he had done, his ivory color run a dirty white, his hands clenching, saying—She's not going.

“Those hands of his . . . when he was six and Julia just turned two, I happened to see him looking into the open window of mother's chamber. Duncan was just up from scarlet fever and he was watching Julia run about inside, a baby still not sure of her feet, with a little round straw hat on her head, her curls damp from play, dragging a shuck doll by its feet. Duncan was poised in a kind of desperation, waiting for her to turn, wondering if she would remember him. It had been a long absence, over a month. What time that is to a two-year-old! At last she saw him, and her little face grew very serious. But only for a moment. She dropped her doll and screaming with delight ran his way, her fat baby arms outspread as much for balance as for love. She had remembered him! The window frame still parted them; Duncan had been warned he might be catching. . . . I heard the low words of endearment, the fierce effort in his small hands tight at his side, the longing to touch clenched there, his slow gaze growing slowly radiant. As callow as I was, I knew I had overseen too private a matter and slipped away.”

from below stairs, muffled by the floor, came the steady beat of the spoon in the batter.

“Then Joe Cree broke the pause. He went over to Julia and picked her up. He threw her into the air and caught her. With a false bluntness he said—Nobody is going to take you away from your brothers. Brothers. Not brother. It's not often given to a man to feel the shape of his Fate. But Joe Cree blindly picked it up and blindly set it down. What does a man, more than a child at jack-straws, pecking at his entanglement? And always with the tool which falters the hand and loses the game. Joe Cree, the good son,

the just master, the upright citizen, the kinsman who knew a kinsman's dues, with sure hand flipping the straws, saying what a fine game life is and a bargain at the price.

"But twice you pay, with cash and afterwards with sorrow. And when you risk the heart you play for keeps. Joe was long on cash those days, but in the child's presence he had felt a twinge of compassion, and he thrust it upon us. But as if it were no more than the quick decision of the day's business, to be forgotten in the next. What right had he to do this, kinsman though he was, and after our hard-come-by compact to part with our sister? Anyway that night in the back room, all of us together in the sodden time of after-sorrow, the children recovered, Duncan mollified, Joe said again—Beverly I'll teach you to grow cotton.

"Try to talk down Fate, you learn its language. Without hesitation Beverly said again—Not another stalk. And Joe as if reasoning with a child asked him how he would feed his people, a sound enough question if you are talking about the same thing. Nor did Beverly hesitate before this—I'll sell them. Joe then—Good God, man, you can't do that, losing his composure, recovering it with the words which must surely shame Beverly—You can't sell them down the river. And Beverly, more distinctly this time—There are as many geese up the creek as down it.

"Then Joe began to pace and Beverly watched him out of the malice of his hurt, knowing he had said an unseemly thing before the ethics of a good slaveholder, but saying it as you speak an obscenity in a foreign tongue. But he faltered a little, as if so far he would make a defense—When we were little, papa worked us in the fields with the hands to clear more ground, to plant more cotton, to buy more slaves, to clear more ground, to plant more cotton . . . Why?

And Joe, sharply—To increase his substance.

—And his debts.

—But the crop paid him out this year.

"As Joe Cree turned and faced my brother, there was the look of naïve cunning and triumph upon his countenance which only

simple men can manage. By that I mean a simplicity of belief which makes all action swift and sure and a world with only the minimum of complication. Which serves up to a point. But it was not to this point. Will ever I forget that pause, that lacerating pause in which that smile welling from Beverly's heart wound twisted his lips? He did not speak. He looked like a corpse which has kept back a little breath just to show God it died of its own free will. His skin was as frail as a wafer. Who says such a silence lacks tongue? Joe Cree stepped back before it, with the look of one who in a dream commits an indecency in public. Beverly's silence had shaped its cry—*And it paid him out of the world, and my darling mother.*

"I couldn't stand it. I said—We mean to grow mules, Cousin Joe.

"Mules. The neutral gender.

"In a crisis we speak ourselves. Anyway Joe was quick to take my words as a way out, for if mules were not cotton, they made it. It was then settled that Joe would run our place until Beverly came of age and a division of the property could be made. Beverly could only agree. Papa had made Joe our guardian."

the door to the stairwell creaked, then banged open. "Can't you all git your breeches on? The first batch of cakes is ruining."

"Yes, ma'm. Coming," Lucius said and slowly got to his feet.

"That fall Beverly took to the woods. Duncan followed him and Dickie for a while, until I sent him to medical school."

"And you?" Lucius whispered.

"Somebody had to stay home. Julia spent her summers with us, and Duncan always came in to be with her. But soon he was taking her to the woods, and there I was left alone, like an old hen who has hatched out guineas, dropping my wings and clucking them home to roost, and they run miles and miles away."

Jack's voice faded out, but Lucius kept the posture of listening. It was as if his uncle's words had not stopped but had sunk into some deeper place and into this place had drawn his eyes and ears,

to be plunged into the suck of its blind flow, sight drowned in hearing, while in the loft room the stillness lapped and swirled. At last Lucius with the effort to be freed from a dream said, "What is it really you are trying to say? Tell me, simply and direct."

"Simple and direct?" The uncle bent his head around and, for a moment, regarded his nephew. "The monosyllable, eh? All right. When you get up in the morning, put your clothes on when your feet hit the floor. The naked man is the natural man. He's forbidden. You keep him covered." Slowly he lifted the jug, drank, and slowly put it down. "Now, go on down and eat some of Frankie's slop. I'll have breakfast up here."

"No," Lucius said. He might have known better than to ask his uncle to be simple, direct. But it was more than that, he felt, as he pulled himself together. "Listen. Cousin Frankie's cattle on the Peaks are out of water. Put that jug down. You've got to witch this well."

Carefully Jack regarded him; at last, "All right. You eat the breakfast. I'll witch the well."

"No," he said. "You come on down now."

"Can't you learn nothing? Go on. I'll be down, but by God, I mean to put a little moisture inside me first. Go on now. Gone."

Lucius stepped down into the hollow well of the staircase. His step was firm, his body firm and supple inside his clothes. He had said no to his uncle and he had told him what to do. He had never done that before. He did not understand the keen feeling of exultation rising to his head, but he felt its power, over himself and over Jack. As he stepped out onto the porch, into the bright day, he still did not understand but he knew he had stepped over some boundary. He splashed the water into the bowl and began to wash. He began to sing. Then he stopped: it was bad luck to sing before breakfast.

The boys looked up as he came into the kitchen. They were all set for fun, little Eph's eyes shining and glancing beyond him for Jack. Jeff, as always when he was not in motion, sat with the stilled

grace of an animal. Already his fresh shirt was dark at the armpits. Why should he notice this; he must have shown something; there was an instant question in his friend's eyes, a dark flush underlay the skin, deepening the brighter burn of the sun. He turned away as his Cousin Frankie looked up from bending over the hearth. She drew the back of her hand across her forehead and hair. She frowned and her eyes jellied over like a chicken's. "Sit down, Lucius. Where is he?" She placed the steaming bowl of hominy on the table.

Jeff moved slightly, and he took his place, their shoulders touching. When he looked up, Jack was standing inside the door, his hair dripping with water, turning his head as if to find a piece of air free of grease. Hands on her hips, Cousin Frankie confronted him in silence. She said sharply, "Set there at the foot, Jack Crop-leigh. Eat and then we'll trade."

He was always surprised afresh at how big Jack was. His head barely missed the top of the door. He leveled his eyes upon her, but he had to bend his head. "You got some old dry cows you want to get shut of?"

"No, I aint. Set down and eat."

"I've give it up. Too many common folks eating now."

"You'd a-better give up drinking. You light a kidney as it is."

Little Eph giggled. His mother threw him a glance as she went back to the hearth.

"I did well to get off with a kidney, with a doctor in the family. Brother Dickie, fresh out of medical school and his diploma not yet framed, saying what an expert carver he was. But Jack, he says, nobody likes to be first. Aint you got some little organ you don't need?"

Frankie was dishing up the ham and pretending not to listen. Jack paused and glanced over at the table. "All right, I said. I'll spare you one teaty."

Little Eph gave a high clear laugh; Jeff smiled as much as he ever did, and his great-aunt Nanny leaned around from the hearth, one hand shielding her face, the other thrusting the flapper expertly

toward the griddle. She smiled her toothless smile, "Why, Jackie boy, I'd be ashamed."

"Aunt Nanny," Jack said, "hiding from me," and he picked her up and swung her in the air.

"Look at granny kick," little Eph shouted with delight.

"You Eph," Frankie said sharply, and set the platter of ham and gravy down. "Put her down, Jack Croleigh."

"Why, she's light as a paper sack," he said, gently putting the small woman on her feet. "You be careful now. A draught liable to suck you up the chimney."

She struck him, her brown speckled fingers in a strut, the skin dried to the forearm, the flesh hanging loose from beneath. Jack smiled down at her. "She's stout as a butterfly." The mask of her face looked many times varnished and cracked, but the small eyes under the waxy lids were bright as a bird's; and like a bird's did not blink but looked at her nephew as out of a great distance.

"You do beat the Jews, Jack Croleigh," she said, her hands feeling the knot at the back of her head, smoothing her rumpled clothes with the jerks of a doll on strings. She turned to her daughter with unexpected swiftness. "Frankie, set at table with Jackie boy. I'll dish up the cakes."

Before Jack could settle himself, Frankie was serving his plate and frowning towards the hearth, as if she feared her mother would spoil the cakes. "And how did you leave Cousin Jule?" Frankie said, giving the amenities their due.

Lucius leaned towards Jeff, and their hair touched. "Look at at him, gagging on that ham fat," he said out of the corner of his mouth.

Jack leaned back, his nostrils working. He swallowed hard. "I left her showing the hands how to buzz," he said to the room at large.

"Buzz, Cousin Jack?" Little Eph was eager.

"Yes, boy. So's they could get low enough to the ground to pick that bumblebee cotton she's got on the uplands."

Eph laughed his laugh and his mother frowned. "It's not

seemly, Jack Croleigh, to make fun of your sister in time of drought, with ruin before us all, all except that Pete Legrand. He's the one to profit from others' mishaps. If it wasn't for the little we get out of the pike, I don't know what we'd do. They aint going to be no crop. And Pete Legrand wants to buy my shares in the pike. He's been s'worrysome—You sell me your shares, Miss Frankie, and you can water your stock at my springs as long as you live. —Tilford Springs, you mean, I said. —Well, Miss Frankie, go to the courthouse and read the deed. —I'll rot first, Pete Legrand, afore I deed you aer gravel, and hit lie in this pike."

The mole on the tip of her chin stiffened. Aunt Nanny, with palsied hand, set a plate of cakes on the table. "Them shares aint yours yet, Frankie Dunbaugh," she quavered. "Pa left me the shares when I stepped down and married Mr. Tilford. He you might say cut me off with them shares."

"Lawsy, mammy, you always saying you stepped down and married pappy." She smiled as if all understood her mother's simplicity. "Pappy was as good a man as any Croleigh, even if he didn't own niggers and a landing on the river."

"Hear, hear," Jack said.

"I said he warn't a man?" The old woman spoke out, her red lids watering. "Mr. Tilford not a man, and him one could jump and click his heels four times afore he touched the ground? Or set his back to a load of corn and heist it out of the mud? Him no man?"

"I didn't say he wasn't stout."

". . . and when I laid him out and shut the door to wash and shroud him, and took my last farewell look. It was a comfort to know nair eye but mine had seen his naked strength, and him laying so heavy and cold I needed a block and tickle to lift and turn him . . ."

"All right, mammy," Frankie interrupted impatiently. "Jack Croleigh." She turned offhandedly towards him. "What'll you take to witch me a well?"

Jack rolled his eyes upwards. "We've got another settlement to make first."

"I don't owe you one red copper cent," she said sharply.

He dipped one of the cakes in the gravy, grimaced and did not eat it. "It's no base metal. A base action you must settle for." He brought his large eyes, gleaming with semi-nausea, carefully down, as if he were handling a fragile object. The boys leaned forward to hear over the batter frying in the grease. "I've in mind the time you put salt in my whiskey." She returned his look contemptuously. "It was at the play party in Green Springs, back when the South was still celebrating the Fourth of July."

"I mind the time," she said.

"I been trying to wash that taste away . . ."

"Like a hog washing slop with slop." Her lip curled.

"First we settle for my ruined tongue."

"It seems to be working pretty well, Cousin Frankie," Lucius said. "Don't let him bluff you."

"I mind the time," she said. She paid no attention to Lucius. "Everbody dancing and singing, and you and your play-pretty, Eddie Dunbaugh, a-laying out in the bushes seeing whichaer one could out-guzzle the other. And there I sat with the old ones, a kind friend favoring a set or two and smiling to my face.—Where's old Eddie? they'd ask. Turned him out to graze, Miss Frankie?" She leaned forward from the waist, as if her body moved in a socket. "And me unheartened, not knowing how to get him home until a granny woman leaned towards me and said—Child, put a little salt in his dram. It'll dry him out for fair. I salted his jug, not yours, but little good it did, him laying already bloated like a cow on clover. It was my salt, my whiskey, my man."

Jack shook his head gravely. "Boys . . ."

"You can pay me." She jabbed her head at each word.

"Don't never try to trade with no woman, boys. Where you want that well?"

She spread her hands over her apron, calming herself. "Up the Peaks near the home place."

"You mean for me to climb the Peaks this weather? Woman,

you don't want no well witched. You short of meat. You aim to kill and cure me in one operation."

"We'll ride you up on old Queen," she said. "I'll give you hide and tallow the first cow we butcher." Her voice was now business-like.

Aunt Nanny brought the last batch of cakes. "Eat hearty, Jackie boy," she said. "The last the best."

"Them's fine cakes, Aunt Nanny, but I got my growth. Pass them to the boys," and he caught Lucius's eye and nodded towards the loft room. Lucius pretended not to understand and said to Jeff, "We'd better go saddle old Queen."

"Hold on there, son," Jack said hastily. "Here I'm the gift of salvation to dying cattle . . ."

"Who said they were dying?" Frankie interrupted.

"A cattle savior and all I'm offered is hide and tallow. I'm dry as your cows, old enemy. Lucius, step up to the attic and fetch my jug."

"Hold on," Frankie said, as if she were being taken advantage of. "I might throw in one front quarter."

"I'll do it for a yearling heifer."

She pushed the white crock water pitcher, filled with molasses, towards him, chuckled grimly when he withdrew. "Eat those cakes and sober up. I'd no notion you'd git drunk before breakfast."

"Have you ever known me to be drunk to where my wits were hampered?"

"I've rayly known you sober, Mr. Croleigh. Drunk or sober, I'd of not sent for you for your wits. I want a well witched. Witching is a gift, I reckon, and drunk or sober you can't mar it."

"Hah," Jack said. "The rotten vessel of the gods."

Pursing her lips, "The ways of the Lord are mysterious His wonders to perform."

Jack jumped up and capered around the room. He stopped before her and slowly pawed his foot.

"Look," little Eph shouted. "He's a bull."

"Will your Baptist cows drink Bacchus water?"

"Lawsy me." Aunt Nanny threw up her hands. "Whoever heard of cows drinking baccy water?"

Frankie had not moved. "I'll give you hide and tallow and one front quarter," she said with finality.

"Hide and tallow, a fat hind quarter, and I'll find enough water to teetotally immerse ever cow and calf running the Peaks of Laurel."

"Don't blaspheme, Jack Croleigh. It's a trade."

No one had spoken for the last hour. Even Jack Croleigh, slouching forward in the saddle, his back curved to a fluid repose, his leg thrown over the pommel cradling his body, apart from the piston plunge of the mule's back, the mule on a slant boring into the air up the side of the Peaks, the rider suspended there as if some wand had put him to a hundred years' sleep, as if he were being propelled out of some preordained magic as old as the world and out of the world's old mystery; or as if he floated upon a column of air and the mule moved and they, touching, did not touch but approached, as the object moving half the distance approaches the forever denied horizon—even he had stopped cursing old Queen. And Queen, sure of foot, truer than line or compass, picking the easier way, the gradual winding of the grade, around boulders, softly through the dry brown moss, kicking the dust of it and the dust hanging to her hocks where the sun burnt it light at air. And her flea-bitten color, long since washed away by the dark slick sweat and globs of sweat as big as honeybees appearing for an instant upon her hide, to break and soak away with the strain of old age matching courage, or merely the habitual strain of the outstretched neck and downslanting head. The silence swelled like a bubble, except for the creak of the gear which imperceptibly, at some certain moment, became the silence, its regular stroke the motion of the hooves padding the ground under the endless trees which gave no shade but shattered the heat about the fading leaves as the small caravan, Jeff and Steele, the well digger, in front and behind the moon-eyed mare, Lucius beside his uncle, in this order

passed into a glade where, before Lucius could square himself, the sun struck his hat and drew his hair thin and fine.

"Christ, I'm so dry I could drink water," Jack Croleigh said and the silence broke and the black gnats fell stinging and droning at their eyes and ears.

Upon the raw scar of his strain Lucius felt the gnats fall like pepper. His body a sponge, his legs dissolved into their stride, ears humming like a wire, only the thin line at the lips retained the precarious balance of his consciousness. He didn't believe it, the soft clap of the bells. Then he stopped and over the loud blood he heard them. Muted, with no beginning or ending either, they rang down the course of his steaming blood, their invisible clappers swinging as sweet as rest, luring to rest, and he knew he must tighten his lips or he would float away upon this frail music. Then from behind it struck, the shock of sound. It struck at the base of his skull, and he whirled and the slow turn of his body followed. There was old Queen, legs set apart, head thrown up, lips drawn back to her nose, in a spasm of honkings.

Jack Croleigh waited until she had finished. "Git on, mule," he said.

She did not move and he kicked her hard. Jeff turned and Steele the well digger turned. They watched the methodical kicks and heard the empty rumble of her belly, but she did not move. "Come here, boy, and take a holt of this halter."

"I never taken it to mind she'd balk this fur up," Jeff said.

"Make haste," Jack Croleigh said. "You want me to cook in my juices."

"She hears the dinner bell," Jeff said.

"Ay God, I hear it too. You pull and, Lucius, you push."

"She's done climbing," Jeff said patiently.

"You pull anyhow."

Jack kicked, Jeff pulled, Lucius pushed. Steele the well digger picked up a stick and brought it down upon her rump. The mule swayed forward and back, as objects do under water; but her feet did not move.

"All right," Jack said. "Blow a spell."

They left off, dropping halter and stick; waited, both mule and men, as in a formal pause in some ritual. Their heavy breathing died away, leaving them in immobile array, their heads slightly downcast, as if with the listening eyes of worship, while the bells ringing now over the entire cove, sourceless to the eye, tolled a requiem to the failing season. And yet the bells were crying an older pause, the rusty swing atop the leaning post off the kitchen door or from the porch near the well bucket, as the brown hand pulled in steady jerks the measured time, and afterwards the stilled woman's body, the hands folded beneath the calico apron, the head like a face on a coin lifted to the burning field, the gaze touching the air—that timeless incision in the timeless sky—and then the awkward turn to the kitchen to shove the first pan of bread into the oven . . . from the head of the cove on down the rolling basin the bells ceased, a last faint clapper dying into silence. Released, Lucius looked down upon the cove. It lay below like a brown puzzle in a box.

"All right," Jack Croleigh said. "All together now. Hephep! Hep!"

"This is already old," Jeff said, dropping the halter.

"I've knowed this here mule," Steele the well digger said after a thoughtful pause, "you mought say, Mister Croleigh, as long as I've knowed this here boy. I made a crop with her oncet. As quite and biddable a critter as ever you seen. And pull. She'd try to pull a sawmill. But you let the dinner bell ring, and she no more'n shoemouth wide to the end of the row, you think she'd step it. Not Queen. She'll set them feet square to the middle and you got to kill her or take out." He looked solemnly about but not at Jack Croleigh. "I always taken out and made tracks for the barn."

"I knew it," Jack said and cursed to himself, slowly, softly, steadily. His voice as if it were tied to old Queen's ears by a string drew them back in critical appraisal. But she did not move. "I

knew it," he repeated in fuller voice, "the moment you broke down my door, Lucius, to lure me here."

"It was laying back on one hinge," the boy said. He tried to smile, but he was too tired.

". . . and there you stood, the fair-haired child of trouble."

Jack sat bemused and then slid off the mule's back. "All right," he said, looping the stirrups over the saddle. "Even a mule's got better sense than to be here. Git on, Queen." He slapped her rump and she turned sedately and moved briskly back down the mountain trail.

The water jug passed and Jack drank deep, without apology. He asked, "How far?"

"A piece more," Jeff said.

Without looking behind, Jack Croleigh walked into the brush. Lucius started to follow, but Steele was already on his haunches, with his back to a tree, opening his lunch. Jeff was hobbling the moon-eyed mare and easing her pack. Lucius was so whipped he would take any excuse to rest, so long as he did not have to confess his need. It shamed him, letting Jack go it alone. He felt he was letting him down, as he watched his uncle's shoulders break high through the thick growth and his hair, the long ropy strands of it, curling from under his hat like a nest of snakes; and then the shoulder, the hair, the black hat disappeared. "We can overtake him," he said abruptly, but no one answered. He felt strangely spent, in spirit now, and dropped to the foot of the nearest tree, ill at ease and wondering why. Idly he watched Steele's hairy flat fingers, with fumbling precision, lay back the newspaper wrapping of his lunch, as if each flap was too frail for his touch. In slow wonderment Steele regarded the puffy biscuit large as a saucer, the white piece of meat, the slice of yellow cheese. With clumsy care he broke off a piece of bread and cheese and, averting his eye, began to eat. Jeff took the lid from the tin bucket and offered the contents to Lucius with formality. Suddenly Lucius felt he was among strangers.

They ate in silence and then Steele wrapped his leavings as

carefully as he had unwrapped his lunch and, leaning back, took out his pipe, crumbled tobacco into its bowl, and lit it. After a few puffs he said, "Mister Croleigh set out like he smelt water."

"We'd better catch up," Lucius said. "He might get lost."

Steele grunted. He tapped the mouth of his pipe. "He aint good cast yet," he said.

Lucius offered a smile to Jeff at this, as if Jack were a hound about to quarter the mountainside, but Jeff had withdrawn further into his reserve, his eyes flickering cautiously about the screen of brush and trees into which they presently must go. Lucius, puzzled by this withdrawal which stood in the way of their easy familiarity, resentful of it, felt more strongly that in some way he had been set apart, not only set apart but that something was being kept from him. This witching for water had seemed simple enough. The switch would go down and they would dig there until they found water. There would be all the fun of camping out, hunting before day for meat. . . . Fun. Well, this was no fun. He was too hot to puzzle it out. He had always thought the sawmill the hottest place but the sun there had never drained him like this climb.

he pulled his hat over his eyes.

In the hatband he smelled the sweet stale residue of himself and the dust from the mill had mingled with this odor, enriching it, reminding him of the first real work, man's work, he had done. Around his head, shut out from his sight but there as sound, the insects whined like tiny saws. They came and went, fused, and the big saw droned and whined, throwing the yellow jet of dust behind the overhead saw and the dust powdering Uncle Peter's cap, the once-blue Federal cap squashed over his head rag, the visor ridged with sweat and dirt and the shiny dust falling slowly as the old black man turned his head, bent slightly forward, his hand on the stick, following with his eye the watery bite of the teeth as they slowly ate through the log, until the hollow chug of the engine

labored, almost stopped with the strain; then the quick uptake of the steam as the plank fell away and the carriage rushed back and the saw whined in the breathless pause before it moved again into the solid butt. And in the glossy air the smell of sap, sour, heady, habit-forming.

The timed crashes of the timber falling, the rumbling log wagons, the oxen piling the logs, the rapid mill, the humming saw—but mainly the sap in the air, like laudanum, got hold of you. So he had at first accepted it, as the reason his father made briefer each visit to the home place which his mother ran now entirely, with Rhears to oversee. And her pretense that she was only looking after things during his father's absence—she made overmuch of this—and when he came in she would discuss each crisis the particular day had brought and his father would listen attentively, their voices lasting far into the night. At first she would brew coffee and her absence in the kitchen would bring the pause that was silence, and the silence would hang upon the dark until, returning, her low rapid speech would begin again, boring like an auger the space between them; and his father's voice, the soft monosyllable, would drop and the room grow quiet. On a hot night, when the doors were open, almost one could hear her thinking; and then her voice would take what her husband had given, flow over it like water over a stone and to that purling he, Lucius, in his room would drop off to sleep. But the time came when his father listened like a banker, and her voice would tighten, grow more rapid, until his father would rise and say—You seem to be making out. How do I know? With perfect patience which is perfect courtesy.

Lying now with his back against the tree upon the mountain side, it seemed to Lucius that it was this perfect courtesy which she assaulted and before which she always fell back. Did the falling back increase the friction between them? And why did she try to break down this courtesy of his? Or did the courtesy prepare for his father's flight to the woods, so that in the end it was he, not she, who had his way?

Friction.

He had never seen it between them until his father put down the mill among Aunt Amelie's trees. One day as they were cruising the timber his father had explained it all. He had told him how the war had ruined farming and that they were eating the dirt and soon that would be gone, for the dirt must be eaten only by measure; it too must rest but cannot rest as things are. The trees were there, and that was their hope for cash to restore house and lands, and money for his education. And then his father told him that he had risked everything on this venture. In things that count, he said, you must be prepared to risk all, but women do not approve or understand. So his mother was not to know. The bargain between his father and his Aunt Amelie seemed strange. She had sold him the timber at a price lower than she could have got, and his father had agreed to cut it in half the time any other lumber company would have asked.

"But why, father? Why did you have to take such a risk?"

Then deep in the woods the two of them squatting like conspirators he had told him. It had seemed reasonable if strange, under the deep shade and with the limbs of the trees so high up. But suddenly, here and now, it came to him that his father had not been to the house for three weeks, not since he had gone to town to pay Aunt Amelie her last payment on the timber. He had left in fine spirits. He had not returned so. There was some connection between what Uncle Jack had told him this morning and what his father had told him that day. If he could only put them together. "Your Uncle Duncan," his father had said, "had been married less than a year to Miss Amelie when the war began. He was the most valuable man in my command. My legion was an irregular troop. We went where we were needed. We worked behind or between the lines, bringing information, raiding; on occasion attacking wagon trains. I think Duncan would have made an indifferent regular soldier, but with us he seemed to have come into his own. He could approach a sentry and lie in wait for hours, his mind and body a single entity, until the sentry would

falter at the watch. Then Duncan was on him, had cut his throat, to lie afterwards upon the body to keep it from jerking, the warm blood of that body's life, already committed in Duncan's denial of his own, spraying his neck and chest until it stopped, stopping any danger of alarm. On the darkest night he led us with cat eyes. He went to and fro through the lines as if he were walking about the farm on a Sunday afternoon. Often I looked at him when he returned from some mission, at the eyes hard as marbles, at the pupils narrowed to a hair. I could only shake my head when I thought of Duncan as clerk. After his marriage he had clerked in a commission house. He was valuable for his knowledge of hides. And that was all. He never saw a customer but paced the floor like an animal caged. Only in the warehouse where the hides were stored did he seem at ease, touching them gently; or when they were too green, it was his nose. . . .

"But the truth is I didn't think much about him as clerk those days. There wasn't time, but it was not that either. It was rather we lived in a different sense of time. Time is a domestic arrangement that we had given over along with our women and our homes. We were devoted men. We strapped death to the pommel and rode. Or we squatted by the fires to the sound of frying meat and hoecakes on the coals and ate quickly, almost surreptitiously, as if food were an indulgence in some vice we could not forego but could dismiss by a brevity of performance, with no more attention to food than to the other habitual needs of the body. Then we lay down, two by two, beneath the common blanket, looked once at the stars, and were asleep. Or if there were no stars but only the anonymous dark, then it was a house each man took for his own. It comforted us to think that the body's death was no more than this, the putting out of light each had seen in the enemy's or companion's eyes. This was the easier because we all knew the sorrow of constant denial. I saw that for our work I must push the men to the limits of endurance, even a little beyond. We denied the flesh by wearing it away. It is this the grosser times of peace cannot remember, that thin skin stretched over the

quivering nerve and muscle. We had only to look at ourselves to see of what the world is made, and what is left for the bones we could always see. Had you stripped us of our foul and tattered clothes you would have seen how light we traveled. In this fellowship we rode and killed or lay together in the creases of the ground, light as shadows. But a shadow is cast from some substance. Miss Amelie appeared one day to remind us.

"She appeared suddenly, not two hours before we were to set out on a mission. There were indications that the enemy was to move in force against our army. I was to find, if possible, the area of his concentration. We were to slip quietly through the middle of his right; circle it; then ride back to our own lines. It was the dark of the moon, or we could not have gone at all. You may imagine the risk, even so. Duncan and I were in a cabin going over each move, step by step, for he as usual was to be our guide. We were discussing an entrance into Parcher's Cove which he alone knew. The enemy, believing its only entrance was from the river, would be off-guard. And then the door opened.

"For an instant the door frame held her like a portrait, one hand raised to her bosom. But I saw only the eyes, two hungry cannibals, and the cheeks gashed and frail as if they had fed that hunger those eyes brought with her into the room. Duncan looked around with annoyance and then his body snapped erect while his glance, delaying, seemed blunted by the wonder of what it met. She gave a throttled cry and rushed towards him. His hands touched her in disbelief; then, like a trap springing, he grasped her. I looked away to give them privacy, although it was I who needed it. They had come together like two parts which make a whole. I tried to collect my wits, to undo the damage her presence here among us, at this time, had wrought. Outside I could see the men quietly looking over their gear, mending bridles, inspecting arms. Their lives might depend upon what I did. As I waited for composure, the smell of the room, as if to deny the fragrance and the meaning of her person, almost stifled me. I had not noticed it before, that odor of cold dead ashes, the sour stale sweat of work

and the body's needs, all that which the generations of life had left behind, soaked up by the walls, a ghostly residue protesting the bitter travail which is man's common lot. It was a ghost I had to lay.

—Miss Amelie, I said gently, this is no place for you.

As if she had not heard me, with a low moan at Duncan's ear —I was dying.

“For a moment I weakened before such desperate need, and desperate indeed it was, for how she had found us I did not know. To pass the army was no great matter, but the wastes and dangers between. That was something else. I could not grant him a furlough. We needed his night eyes for the dark passage ahead. But I would promise. I gained their attention, his at least, and already I saw it was too late. Duncan's face was set with desire. Perhaps it was cruel, certainly she never forgave me, but I knew I must separate them at once. Perhaps you don't know it, but your uncles were not only not town, they were not even country broke. They neglected a fine property to take to the woods. If it hadn't been for me and your Uncle Jack, they would have lost it all. Jack Croleigh is rudely civilized. With the others, when they did return, it was male: female. It was as simple as that. Their needs satisfied, they grew restless. And generally took off. I had seen that look in Duncan's eye when he enlisted, not trapped exactly but the impatience of a thoroughbred hitched and plagued by flies. I believe I told you he had been married less than a year.

—Now, Duncan, I said, I will send Miss Amelie to that house two miles back. She can stay there until we return. Then I'll give you a week's furlough.

“She looked at me as if I spoke a foreign tongue. And he, too, well I went to the door and sent for your Uncle Jack. I knew Duncan would not trust her with any but close kin.

—I'll take her, Duncan said, his voice dry and tight.

—You know I can't spare you.

“At last understanding what I meant to do, she came to me, fluttering like a winged bird. —You can't, she wailed. I can't live

without him. I'll dress in men's clothes. I've brought them. I can ride.

"It was pitiful. Responsibility often brings us to brutal measures. But Miss Amelie's face haunts me now at night, when for some cause I lie awake wondering. The war we lost, so our small mission that night, which miscarried anyway, was not so important a matter as I took it. But, son, you've got to believe that what you do matters, even when it fails and even when a larger destiny wills it to fail."

Lucius said, "Father, did he . . . ?"

"Yes. Duncan was killed at the entrance to Parcher's Cove. I should have seen that her presence had already spoiled him for the work at hand. It was my failure."

"But, father, how could you know?"

"It is the duty of the man in authority to know. It is why he is given authority."

"It was Uncle Duncan's, too."

"Oh, Duncan." His father frowned and slowly shook his head. "She never forgave me. And she is right, and I have given her a chance to get even. I have gambled your future against her hurt."

He had never felt so close to his father. It seemed to him then that he was all his father's hope: the ruin of war and time his father would mend through him. What had happened? To make his father so stern. To withdraw entirely to the mill and woods. Here on the side of the Peaks of Laurel what had been blurred was sharpened as by a glass. The name of his Uncle Duncan, a man dead before he was born, turned up as the link. In his Uncle Jack's story this morning, which now seemed ages away, and in what his father had told. But how? And what? And this trek he was now on, which at first had seemed no more than a simple errand, was charged with hidden meaning. It was only three days ago he had turned in the mill yard to see his father beckoning to him. It had not seemed strange at the time that he should have turned, as if forewarned. It often happened this way. He marveled how his father had only to reach forth and have what he sought

put in his hand, or turn and find the one he needed to do his bidding. Captain Cree. With what weight that name was spoken, and always it gave him the fullness of pride to hear it. So he showed no surprise that day. His father merely gave the slight motion of the head; then turned back to Cousin Frankie in her rattletrap of a buggy, with the spring listing on the driver's side and she with the lines in her lap and her face withdrawn into the slatted bonnet, the pleated ruffle bobbing as she pecked at the air and his father gravely attentive, nodding once or twice. But now the gravity seemed portentous, beyond the occasion, for the errand was nothing beyond courtesy or a kinsman's dues. —Lucius, his father had said, go fetch your Uncle Jack. Miss Frankie wants a well witched. Lucius, no longer son . . .

Lucius.

The name emerged from a blur of sound

and then his eyes struggling with the glare and for a moment with the form bending down upon him. "You the big all-day walker," Jeff's voice said, falling upon him as secret as a reproach at night.

As he looked into the wide iris stretched upon blankness, it was the eyes, not the voice, which seemed to speak. "Maybe we ought to brought you a mule, too," slipped through the motionless lips and he knew this was Jeff's best at humor.

So that he might not be made to explain what could not be spoken, he caught Jeff's legs and threw him and they rolled over the ground, breathing hard and laughing when they got up, brushing leaves and the smell of dirt away. And he was glad he had done it. They were together again.

But Steele spoke. "Now aint you the playboys."

Jeff's flushed face darkened. He frowned to restore his dignity but the too smooth features and clear eyes made him look only young and surly. As if aware of this he said roughly, "Let's git going," and struck the mare's rump hard and he set a hard pace, for they were now come to the steepest part of the climb. He did

not look back even when the mare stumbled. What was the shame to make Jeff feel their play had impaired his manhood, never to let up in his upward drive to the high Peaks and, although nothing was said by sign or word, Lucius could not help but feel Jeff had set himself to wear him down. It could not be Steele. Fast or slow, over the smooth or uneven ground or up the precipitous walls they bent around, the pace Steele kept never altered. His foot touched the sod as if he feared to bruise it, the springing knees making a line in the air as the ground flowed by, and in that flow even endurance lost itself until at last when the earth grew still, Lucius could not at first know they had reached the top of the first spur,

some forty feet beneath his eyes

a basin running as far as the great scattered hardwood and cedar would let him see. It was the surprise of finding this dip in the level top which, for a while, diverted him from the waving grass, the soft coolness, the suggestion of moisture; and then this struck him with a sense of reprieve almost, for he had come to think the dry and burning land the common state of nature. Even yet he could not break the spell of the burning sun. The sides of the basin, rising like walls, had the mysterious look of a private oasis, hiding the basin, shutting out the world and its weather. From the way Jeff took it in he saw they had come to the homesteading of the Tilfords, and Jeff's father, Eddie Dunbaugh, herded the cattle upon it, not as the master, which as Cousin Frankie's husband he should be, but as a trusted retainer. This much he had sensed, for the land belonged to Aunt Nanny.

"Pete Legrand would like to git a-holt of this," Jeff broke the stillness with his pride.

Steele said dryly, "Legrand don't want much,"

Jeff stared down into the basin.

"not no more than the land that bounds him."

Jeff's back straightened and his body seemed one flexible muscle. "He'll not cross the Tilford line no more."

It was a moment before Lucius realized that Steele's humor

had condemned Mister Legrand. Although their presence here on the mountain was evidence of his power, since they had had to sell him the Tilford spring during the war for bread and meat, Lucius felt Mister Legrand had been forced to confront them all as a man and not by what he owned, and that as a man he had been dismissed. Steele lifted his eyes from a cursory study of the basin and with a jerk of the shoulder, the hack of laughter, both contempt and affront sounded clearly in his voice. "We'll not have no trouble tracking Mister Crophleigh."

The tall grass lay bent in swathes wide enough to have been made by a wild heifer, long straight paths suddenly jaggging around trees but always straightening out and keeping one direction. He understood then what his uncle's reckless stride must mean to a woodsman who always covered his tracks, even when there was no need, the sure tread which does not turn a leaf. And he learned too in the strain of pride to keep up and that strain of the body which is the mind's clarity that his uncle's arrogance was all innocence: the tramp of a man accustomed to walk always over his own land or land he had rights on, never measuring as the small man did each tree, each turning of the row, with jealous careful eye. Was this the affront—being everywhere at home? And was the feeling Steele showed, which had been lacking in his dismissal of Pete Legrand, the sense of betrayal of his own kind, for surely they looked upon his uncle as a familiar.

But his uncle was not one of them, in spite of his familiar ways. No more, he saw now, than he was. There was a difference, and it was this which made him feel set apart, almost as if he were where he had no business, where he was only tolerated. But could Jeff and Steele not see that in spite of this they were all men in their own right? Lucius was annoyed, particularly at Jeff. He said abruptly, "Let's get on, since the way is so plain," and plunged down the side of the basin, loosening rocks on the brittle limestone ledges, and they bounced and rolled beside and ahead of him, so that at the foot he stood for an instant, in the pelting, the object of his own violence. Jeff and Steele followed in their unhurried

way, their gaze not averted but lifted above the small avalanche gathering against his stride.

Soon his haste outwore itself and he felt Steele and Jeff behind him and heard Steele: "Son, if you aint careful you'll overtake yourself."

He walked on. The sibilant grass brushed his thighs; the moist air, heavy with the smell of mould and earth, saturated his lungs and filled out his flagging muscles with borrowed strength. The floor beneath was spongy now except where rock lay scattered, as by a petulant hand. Once he looked up and high above the dark slick trunks he saw sunlight pelting the interlocked branches, a luminous cloudburst, too high for its fury to reach the quiet basin's floor over which he was beginning to feel himself pass as through some forbidden place. To his front and side the basin appeared as open as a meadow, and yet his vision was everywhere blocked by clumps of laurel and honeysuckle. Neither barred the way, nor opened it up. He passed on, as though he moved always through the same place, his ears deadened by the quiet, his sight by a sensuous glaze. Without beginning or ending the basin was there, and he was there. Deep within it he trod the dark green light. He dared not speak, lest he drown.

The pace became freer in grass no higher than anklebone. Underfoot old furrows made short choppy rolls. The trees thinned out, their trunks gray now, and suddenly blackjacks opened upon an old clearing.

"Pappy's grazed hit short," Jeff said.

Everywhere the light was clear and even, so that objects at a distance were as sharp as those near by; and in that light at the far side of the field Jack Croleigh was discovered, his fists up and before him as if clasping an invisible gun, walking in stealth towards the forest, his body reflecting the trees' density and the threat of what lurked there. Was this his Uncle Jack, the aimless, careless and wise companion, that figure now so intense and formal, moving as one who has stepped out of light into shade, whom the

shade pursues, the feet gliding close to the ground and all his intensity seeming to come from the unbroken touch between foot and earth? The strangeness in the familiar so focused Lucius's vision that he saw him at last as bearing a bowl full to the brim and the brim trembling, upraised but not yet offered.

Jack showed no awareness of their approach. As they drew near, they were careful not to disturb him. The forked switch, butt-end up, he held before him, and the switch made scarcely a tremor; his gaze steady, as it held upon the exact center of the triangle of space the switch defined. This and the careful glide gave him the appearance of moving in an alert trance. They fell in behind him,

re-entering the parched world. It was so dry Lucius felt the drought must lie far below ground here. Just as he was thinking this, the forest crackled and rustled . . . upon the instant he thought the plateau was opening; large cracks had gapped the field, but these were already there. As the sound swelled, he breathed in relief, recognizing hoof beats. Cattle in ragged line, tossing their heads and swinging their necks up through the blackjacks and brush to sweep the horn flies from their hides, an old bull rubbing down a row of saplings, broke into the field with that abrupt swing of a skirmish line. They charged the short grass, scattering over the ground in their stiff up-and-down leaps; then, as if at command, began to graze. One old cow, leaping and bellowing, her flat dry sack flapping her belly like a glove, was the last to enter. She, too, after butting a heifer out of the way, lowered her head. The sudden shift to an ordered quiet seemed more violent than the lumbering attack of their entrance. The herd might have been all day in the old field.

Then he saw it—the clay-colored legs of the cattle, drying in cracks up to their knees.

It was a sign, not only of common water—the cruel climb out of the burning valley would not let him accept so simple an explanation—it was the sign of the staff smiting the rock, the miracle gushing from the crack before the glazed eyes and parched

throats. It was this but it was a private sign for him, too. As if the answer awaited him, he faced about

to see on the edge of the woods a little man on a calico pony, half out of the underbrush. In the failing light man and animal, so still and so much of a piece were they, might have been some abortive growth out of which the brush sprouted.

The pony gave a lurch into the field, the little man swaying like a hump upon its back. Without a saddle his legs, bent to the curve of the pony's flanks, hung down like useless appendages. From hat to bare feet everything that touched him lost its particular identity, the dirt on his feet, the clothes on his back, even the hat which weather had deprived of shape and color. Only the eyes resisted the gross assertion of his nature. They were as hard as china chips and as blank. But it was the pony's eyes one noticed. Bright and bulging with malice, snapping at the cattle, they watched for both. Falling like a spent bullet into Lucius's bemusement came Jeff's voice, "Thar is pappy. Come to say howdy-do."

Eddie Dunbaugh, Jeff's father, Frankie's husband, herdsman to the family cattle, one-time companion in arms to Jack Croleigh—these facts Jeff's voice intruded to establish. But the facts were meaningless. Lucius could not disencumber himself of the mystery of the first encounter. What he saw was sharp and clear, as impelling as the action in a recurrent dream. Only the meaning, as in a dream, eluded him. He felt a force on the way of becoming a presence. It was timeless and so without history. It obliterated the personality he had known as Eddie Dunbaugh, and so space; or it comprised both in that identity of man with what is indestructible in him. This was the mystery. Lucius could not understand it, he could only feel it.

Jack Croleigh passed, the switch still upright. He passed without greeting, nor did Eddie speak. Only the chipped eyes glazing for recognition. Jack made a round, drawing nearer over untrod ground. Eddie spoke, "You treading a right smart piece from the home stump, an't you?" The voice was high and shrill. Lucius had the sense, for the moment, of the pony whinnying. And

then, as if the little man willed it, or as if nature had held itself back until his arrival, the switch went down barely three paces from where the pony stood. It went down with a sweep. All gathered to see the down-turned switch; saw the bark split itself near the trembling fists. From beneath gleamed the slick and sappy wood. "It's a strong stream," Jack Cropleigh said and threw away the switch.

The pony, sidestepping, circled the spot; then backed into position facing the cattle. Eddie said over his shoulder, "You dry, to come so far for water?"

"I don't drink it myself," Jack said. "But I am dry."

He looked directly at his friend for the first time. "Why don't you take that mouldy piece of dough you call a man and find me a drink?"

The last flare of the sun lightened and softened their countenances. The bull whip coiled over Eddie's shoulder glistened; almost it seemed to writhe. In the sudden light Lucius saw that Eddie was fat, his body one lump of proud flesh stretching the buttons, large woman's buttons, on his shirt so that his underwear showed through like dirty coarse skin. The glare faded and a coolness came into the air. Then Eddie spoke again, as if he had awaited this moment. "I've drunk with you. I'll drink again." He glanced at Steele who was dropping a rock at the spot where the switch went down. "But not out of no hole in the ground."

Eddie waited; the length of the wait became a demand. Steele cleared his throat, as if to break a descending pause. "Miss Frankie," he said, "was afeared the cattle was hurting for water." As Eddie gave no response, he added, "She traded with us to help out."

Then Jack rushed his voice, giving it the ring of a false bluffness. "You might think that cistern you call a belly can water your stock. But it won't. If you'd set your feet under your own table once in a while, you'd learn some sense." He shook his shoulders, raised his head restlessly. "But we're wasting time. What sow's nest you sleeping in? If you don't aim to get me a drink, tell me where you sleep and I'll root around for the jug."

Eddie overlooked the field. Half the cattle were down, chewing

their cuds; shadows thickened within the forest's depths; a few birds chirped briefly, deepening the hush; the last streamers and blotches of color yet stained the sky and the blue chips of Eddie's eyes darkened, now glistened, as if into their tiny orbs shrank, as it was expiring, the immensity of the day. Eddie spoke out of a great wonderment: "You aiming for me to draw water for cattle?"

His incredulity was making an absurdity of their mission. Jeff stepped forward. "I'll draw it, pappy," he said quietly but eagerly. His father recognized him for the first time. The boy faltered under the gaze but got it out. "The crop, what they is of it, is laid by."

"I witched it," Jack interposed. "The boys can dig it. You can draw it or let it lay and the cattle perish."

Eddie lifted the pony's reins. The pony tossed its head and snapped its eyes at the intruders. "I don't aim for no cattle to perish," he said.

Perish . . . the word stuck like wax. It had the ring of a threat. The vague unease the climb had brought Lucius to, the bitter melting of his strength by the sun had now changed, as the night rushed down upon them coming to camp, to a deep melancholy. The wonderful elation of his awakening in the loft room, when anything seemed possible, any wish a gay accomplishment, that indeed had perished. But why? Because he had climbed a mountain and met a man on a calico pony who smelled like rancid milk.

His odor drenched the swag of the camp site, as if defining the absolute reaches of his authority, at once personal and ambiguous, for what is the sweat of a man? And does he make his own odor? Does he have the power by one drop of making it bitter or sweet?

"Sweet-horned Jesus," Jack said, stopping dead at the center of the slick-paced ground. "A man opens his mouth on a metaphor and farts the literal fact. You do sleep in a sow's nest, you wallow-son of a bitch."

Eddie made no reply but kicked at the embers of the fire

while Jeff tossed in brush. A thick smoke cottoned upwards. The wild sow could have picked no better place for her bed. Protected by deep foliage, she had raised some four feet from the ground a mass of sticks and leaves, and to give it more protection from the weather Eddie had set up poles and piled branches on top for a roof. Withdrawn, barely visible now, the cattle pens lay about it. Between two chestnut trees a long cedar pole had been fastened by hickory withes. From this hung skillets, spoons, a kettle, and the hind quarter of a beef.

The nipple of a jug stuck out of the leaves and sticks. It was barely visible, but Jack gave a cheerful shout, "All the comforts of home." He slung the jug in the crook of his arm and drank. "Nectar," he said and took another. "The ways of God to man. Look up into the mountains, all ye who are weary and overladen, and comfort you at the sight of the swan rising to his perch. And in his song marvel at all farewells. What if the widow Leda burns in the valley? Here we have an Olympian view and—nectar." He drank again. "We can do without the ambrosia."

He tossed the jug to Steele. Without haste Steele removed the cob and wiped the mouth with his sleeve. He swallowed carefully.

"Ah, Leda, so soon widowed," Jack sighed and fell against the nest.

"I don't believe I'm acquainted with no widdy Lee," Steele said politely, crumbling tobacco for his pipe. "Is she any kinfolks in this beat?"

"Just the mother of trouble, that's all," Jack said and shook his head sadly.

Steele took a coal out of the fire and nimbly worked it around the mouth of his pipe. "I've knowed widdies to cause trouble," he said, "them that won't pull sangle in the shafts."

Jack was now lost in the motion of the mounting fire. Eddie with the ease of skill was cutting large steaks from the beef. His thin legs moved lightly to and fro under his barrel body as he laid back the red meat and slapped it down upon a block. On second glance it was the big-barreled body which swung, as if apart from

any support, and the feet in dancelike steps following, an inch forward and back with the precision of failing muscle. But their glide willed the memory of a lither form.

Jeff squatted by the fire, idly adding wood. With each stick the blaze heightened and the bright sparks sprinkled the dark funnel between the trees and high overhead the top of a big white oak moved, the outer leaves undulating in the hot draught.

Jack settled back into the twiggy nest. "The swan or the dove," he asked, speaking in a somnambulant tone and with the edge of irony with which one, out of his need, speaks the secret of his predicament in a foreign tongue, receiving but not sharing comfort. "The swan or the dove, which will it be, boys? The white thrust of the feathered bone, the hovering song? Or the peck of the mourning dove? Choose if any choice is left." His hands went out spasmodically, as if in supplication, and it could be seen that already he was a little drunk.

"I've heard the old folks name it," Steele said mildly, "how they was swans in this country when they crossed over. But they don't use here no more." He reflected. "Turtle doves now. They uses a plenty."

"Don't I know it," Jack said. "The cock and the hen taking turns on the nest. The sacred bird. Probing the veiled ear. But Jesus, how common the unveiling can get to be."

Jeff looked briefly at Jack and then at Lucius. Lucius raised his eyes. As if this were a signal Jeff brought fresh wood, and the fire leaped afresh, throwing into relief the half-grown hounds straining against the poles of their pen, the desperate sorrow of their eyes rolling in the red blaze, their tails beating in the anguish of expectation, or freezing as the knife glided and the meat hung limp. At any moment their sharp ribs must slit their skin. With a flick of the wrist Eddie tossed them hunks of meat. They met it in the air, the arc and the leap, one snapping of jaws, one fury of snarls, a yelp, and the hounds were back at the poles, begging, clawing. Not once did Eddie turn their way. Only when an old bitch climbed out of the sow's nest, puppies squealing at her teats

and falling back into the bed and over its sides into Jack Cropoleigh's lap, did Eddie stop to watch her slow and martyred progress. He paused, head bending from the rounded shoulders, and looked at the long ears, the thin ribs, the teats almost dragging the ground. "Thar now, Susie," he said gently and tossed in quick succession three hunks of meat. She snapped at it as if she were catching flies; then turned her compassionate eyes accusingly at her master. "Go long," he said. "You done eat."

The puppies, rolling and scrambling and squealing, overtook her and she dropped to let them suck.

"Aye God," Jack said, raising his voice to be heard above the grunts and squeals, picking the puppies out of his lap and carefully tossing them towards their dam. "A sow's nest makes a good bed in a tight. But to share it with a bitch and her litter. I'd as soon drink mare's milk."

"I've drunk mare's milk," Eddie said and turned away to pour water into the flour sack.

"No doubt you've crossed with a beast, too," Jack said amiably. "Lucius, son, fetch me the jug before Steele gives himself the colic."

Steele adjusted the cob and pitched the jug to Lucius. It swung lightly to his finger and as Lucius offered it, his uncle pointed towards their host, working the dough in the flour sack. "Offer some refreshment to your Cousin Eddie, boy. It might improve his flavor some."

"Yours," Eddie said and drank.

"Bedding and running with beasts, I see you aint lost your manners. There's still hope for you, whatever you've lost up here." Then Jack swung the jug into the crook of his arm. His Adam's apple pounded like a valve. At last he freed his lips and sighed.

"You shrunk your guts in place that time," Eddie said and slapped the dough down on the block.

"Shrunk'm and reamed'm," Jack said comfortably. "That's what I done. A clean-shrunk gut is the genteelest way I know to

show I appreciate hospitality. And a reamed gut is a solace agen the sorrows of the world. And ingratitude. Here I climb these Peaks of classic name and fame, in frying weather, to witch you a well, you my old buddy and companion in arms. You'd thought I come to collect taxes."

"I don't need no well," Eddie said flatly. He walked over and held out his hands, leprous with dough and flour.

Jack passed the jug. "You need to soak in one a week."

Eddie threw the stopper away as if it fretted him and swallowed in great gulps, wastefully, the whiskey running like tusks through his beard. Slowly wiping his mouth, he turned in a daze; his eyes reddened and bulged in the firelight like an animal at bay. Swaying, he lifted his bulk upon itself and, throwing away the empty jug, walked steadily to the block and began to knead the dough. He flattened it with his hand and dropped one great biscuit into the oven. Deftly, in continuous movement, he lifted the lid on top, raked coals beneath its legs, heaping others onto the lid, until the oven stood out from the fire like a spangled beehive.

"Jefferson, draw me them flat rocks out'n the far." He spoke gruffly to his son. It was the first time he had addressed him by name and the boy stepped lightly forward with a pole. Eddie waited, forearm piled high with steaks, his head bent towards the rocks, his nostrils flaring, testing the heat. Impatiently he frowned at his son and the boy withdrew into the shadows. With a flick of the wrist, the firelight flickering upon his fat forearms, Eddie began dropping the steaks. Each fell flat upon its rock and the rich sound broiled into the air.

The odor of the meat drifted through the now silent camp. Lucius felt he could not wait; his mouth was swimming. He was drawn unresisting into the orbit of Eddie's movements. To and fro the shapeless host went in a jerky glide, in and out of the shed room with salt and peppercorns, toward the aromatic meat, raking coals to the oven, swaying as if weaving a dance. Once he disappeared entirely, returning with a fresh jug streaked by earthmould.

"This hearn's the best run yet," he said, circling the fire and offering it to the older men. As he drew near, Lucius drew back to forfend him from the man's rank odor; but it settled like a fog, mordant, clogging. . . . "Take ye a snort, young man," Eddie said.

Lucius grabbed the jug, swallowed and jerked away, gasping. "Hit'll shed your milk teeth," Eddie said.

And then Jeff was there, blocking his father's way. When the jug was not offered, looking his father steadily in the eye, Jeff carefully took it out of his hands and, with a sudden upturning of the head, drank. Lucius watched his throat suck in, saw the tears welling, saw the desperation and its defiance. At last he lowered the jug and thrust it into his father's belly.

There was a pause. "So ye think you'll wean you from your mammy's dugs?" Eddie looked at him and walked away.

After this to Lucius the night grew vague, except that his head got light as a gourd and the jug, as the evening wore, seemed to float by. He remembered Jeff's exultant, flushed face, his eye winking, and did they or did he only think they ran into the woods, their arms entwined, shouting? There came the moment when the world turned over and, afterwards, his fine feeling into soddenness. He fell asleep somewhere and later, in that inner time of sleep, sensed the warmth and the body weight against him; and then, in a dream plunging downward through the green light of a basin, as heavy now as water, he lost his breath and felt his throat, swelling and choking. He plunged upwards into consciousness, half turned to the form beside him. He felt the hard ground, his neck in a rigid embrace he was struggling to release. The arm gave, Jeff dropped it to his side, snorted and turned over, throwing his hands out before the night as if to shield him from some hurt.

Awake now Lucius lay upon his back, looking upwards into the tangled dark of the white oak's crown, sliced by a lesser dark and stars like sparks neither rising nor falling. Gradually his vision exuded a twilight in which the tall overspreading tree ceiled the camp, its great limbs outstretched, clutching the dark, drawing it

to earth like a tent, the haze from the fire increasing the illusion of closeness, of cover against the exposure to the open spaces, and he curled up in that old primordial fear in the blood, bundling close to Jeff, his friend. Through the multiple sounds of the forest he got the sense of something moving in the grove. It was too regular for an animal. Cautiously he raised his head and, at that moment, a log fell in two; the fire blazed. . . . Eddie Dunbaugh was slowly tramping to and fro beneath the oak, the bull whip wrapped about his shoulder, its handle held like a club in his fist. In the fire's flare, already dying away, he saw him pause to scan the gloom with the expectancy of one who waits for what must come. At that instant the fluttering blaze snuffed out. Eddie's bulk grew immense, as if it bred the dark. Blinded now, Lucius saw nothing; but he heard the pacing resume its stealthy course, the sound of it growing lighter and lighter as his eyes drooped, closed.

At first dawn he awoke with a troubled sense of the vigil he had witnessed; maybe dreamed. Jeff was pouring coffee into a tin cup, a cracked bowl and a gourd dipper balanced against a rock. Jack, pale in the thin light, his beard unkempt, was holding a shaking hand for the coffee. "Shake a leg, boy. You want me to sleep all day?" Jeff did not hurry. His movements were deliberate, and he showed a fresh assurance. He set the pot upon the coals and handed the older man his cup.

"God, the cruelty of the young," Jack said, cupping his hands about the tin, blowing and sipping as he eased down upon a stump. "But your day will come. You'll know then the meaning of the small comforts." And then, "Where Eddie and Steele?"

"Grazing and hunting," Jeff said. He brought Lucius his gourd and, squatting on his haunches, blew easily into his own bowl.

"Well aday," Jack said more firmly. "The one thinking he can slip out on Fate, the other sent here to dig it up but wouldn't know it if it come up the turnpike hard-mouthed as Balaam's ass, and

as talkative, thinking if he thought at all somebody's made a poor trade. And there's proof of my words while they are still wet on my tongue."

His quizzical eye seemed to part the foliage and make way for Steele coming into camp with a string of squirrel. "God," he breathed aloud, "I know so much I'm scared of myself."

Steele passed beyond Jack's gaze but the gaze held until the girl, almost on Steele's tracks, appeared. She stood just within the grove, both shy and bold, in a faded garment which came to her knees. The dress was too small, exposing as it confined the budding lines of her body. Her face was thin, the tender bones pressing sharply the smooth brown skin. She had the sensuous air of being both innocent and knowing, of a young thing too early forced. But it was the eyes which held them. They were fresh as a child's and of a faded blue, the look of a woman who has borne too many children. She advanced tentatively, unwilling to trust herself too far out of the screen of trees. Without prologue her hands made a languid wringing gesture and she turned her head from side to side but looked at none of them. She spoke as a schoolchild recites, "He said to shoot whataer sipped at the spring, two-foot or four-foot, didn't make him no mind or hightail it out of his house."

Nobody moved. For once words failed even Jack Croleigh. Half-rising from his stump, he blurted out, "Who?" And again, "Who is who?"

She looked at him in wonderment.

"Who, girl, who said that?"

"Why, Mister Pete Legrand," she said surprised to be asked.

"Who's going to do this shooting?"

"Othel. . ."

The girl was plainly at a loss.

"Who is this girl?" Jack asked fretfully.

"Nate Rutter's," Steele said. "Othel's her baby brother."

"God for my sins what people I run in to." And then quickly, thinking back and fast, "A Rutter cropped for me after the war. Nate it was. He was a restless fellow, always moving. I heard he had gone to Indiana."

Steele was skinning a squirrel. "A Rutter will move as long as there is land to move on."

Jack was up now and pacing. He glanced once at the girl whose head was still averted, her arms hanging like sticks. She was absolutely motionless. "Then how did he get back here? Did the land give out in Indiana?"

"I reckon Nate did. He's a-squatting up ar in the old Tilford house. Pete Legrand let him stay on, give him a truck patch, to watch for him."

"Well, he's high enough," Jack said. "If the trees don't block the view."

"Varmints now or cattle," Steele said, "hurt Legrand and they stray on his land."

"Mister Dunbaugh is sich a friendly fellow," the girl's voice interposed, "a-branging beef ever time he killed, it be unneighborly not to name it to him, what Mister Legrand was fixen for Othel to do. Them was the words mammy lined out to pappy."

Up to this moment the girl had kept the air of a messenger, the sexless presence, showing no awareness that the conversation had any reference to her or hers, so that her voice came with the surprise of a fresh entrance. Jeff gave a lift to his head, a swift, quickening look and then stared at his feet. Jack tried to get her attention but she shifted her head slightly, like a wild thing slipping just beyond the snare. He said, "What did this pappy of yours say to that, shooting a man down for watering his stock in time of drought?"

"Git back to the wash pot, woman, or I'll slap the snot out of ye."

Jeff put his coffee down and walked over to the quarter of beef in a half prance, half swagger, a slight frown on his brow. He began cutting a large hunk. His muscles slipped beneath his clothes, as if they had just freed themselves. He found a sack and dropped the meat into it. He nodded curtly to the girl. "Here. I'll tote it home for you."

His voice carried a hard diffidence, but Lucius had seen the look pass between them, a flicker of the eyelid, but almost it seemed

their bodies reached across the space which divided them and touched. As Jeff passed before in mountain fashion, the girl moved her shoulders slightly. She waited until Jeff was several paces ahead and then slid into the path behind him. They walked away, two parts of a single movement in unison together, Jeff never looking back to see if the girl followed, the brush parting and closing for him, her head slightly cast down, following in catlike glide, the flow of her young flesh in the tight dress, the smooth grind of the hips creasing the cloth between her small buttocks. Lucius stood up, his pulse beating with a slow heavy stroke at his throat.

"All right, Steele," Jack said. "That well better be dug in record time."

Steele watched the retreating couple, slipped another squirrel off the string. "Eddie don't need no well, long as he waters at another man's hole."

"I see," Jack said slowly, and Lucius could almost see his thoughts leaping to connect, clarify. "Then why did you come all the way up here to dig a well you knew you would never dig?"

"A trade's a trade."

Jack reflected upon this, and then, "You think Frankie suspected?"

Steele tossed the squirrel onto its pile, the skin on another. Jack watched him, as if there were all the time in the world, as if there was no need to mount the moon-eyed mare and ride hard after Eddie to warn him, or turn her head in the other direction and stop Jeff and ask him what he thought he was doing, ambling through the woods with a girl and a sack of beef, when his father drew momentarily towards the fatal spring. Were they all deaf, or dreaming that they could sit and talk and skin squirrels with the bullet molded and the gun primed? Lucius blurted out, "We must stop it."

Neither of the older men seemed to hear; then Steele, pitching another naked, ratlike body onto the rising pile, paused. "Well, now. You turn a man out to graze before his time, you better pick the pasture you turn him in."

"So that's it," Jack said, looking quickly to the woods where the couple had gone.

"Some sweat for their victuals. Some for their pleasure. Nate Rutter's womanfolks make one sweat do for both."

Jack got up. "I think I'll step over to Nate Rutter's. Come along, Lucius."

Lucius could not help glancing into the green screen which shut in the path; especially into those parts opening upon the withdrawn places of the mountain, the dips and hollows, the flat outhanging rocks jutting from beneath bush and laurel. He hardly knew what he was doing, so that Jack, speaking suddenly, startled him. "You can look," Jack said, "until your eyeballs fall out and you'll not find them. The mountain is mighty private."

"You mean Jeff and that girl?" Lucius flushed. "I wasn't looking for them."

"Oh, no, your sight as slick as a rock skimming water, as if to get wet was the last thing it wanted, when all along it was rushing towards the spot where it would hover and plunge, until it touched bottom."

"Jeff wouldn't have anything to do with that common girl."

"Oh, he wouldn't, wouldn't he?" Jack looked briefly but with compassion at his nephew. "Where that's concerned we're all as common as water in a pond. We all come to that brink, some sooner, some later, and travel its circle. But it's not the Jeffs who lap like hunting dogs on the run who make the trouble. It's those who come to it in the miasmal swamps, as gilded as Helen's eyes, and though it may boil up in wiggle tails as thick as pus, they'll kneel and drink and rise up thirsty."

They walked along and Lucius said, "But why?"

"Listen. All I know is that what goes up is bound to come down. It's where it comes down that matters. You learn that," he said, "and you've got the bull by the tail."

The trees, thinning, brought them towards a clearing.

"And Frankie Dunbaugh," he continued, with Lucius trying desperately to follow, for he knew his uncle never spoke idly, "her mouth twitching like a mule's ass, counting the toll in dimes and quarters and fifty-cent pieces with a few dollars making a squat pile

and the eagle's wings spread over it like all outrageous hope, but the dimes and quarters rise high enough. They make dollars in time. But does all this silver do her any good at night, alone and in bed with the quilts drawn up to her chin and not able to sleep for the thoughts it's brought her to? Let the quilts be as deep as the wool on a barren ewe's hide, will it keep her from shivering on the way to market? Whoever looked into the mouth of a yearling lamb or not count the teeth of an old one? A little common sense could save us all, but Frankie clinks her silver and trades and sends us up here to sink her hole by proxy and the switch goes down and the water is there for the digging—that I know, for I'm the man with the wand—but you may dig through to China and anyway you take it water underground is history. Where is the man ever saw Sheba come twice to Solomon—I'm not punning, although as you know I am sometimes given to obscenity, that last comfort of the dispossessed,

or

if you want to be more up to date, did Lee twice know the agony of Appomattox? And Appomattox has more to do with it than you think. You let a man be whipped, whether in a trade over a cow with two light quarters or in that argument of states, war, be he ever so shrewd or never throw his arms away, and Eddie was a good soldier, the next morning he will find the woman trying on his breeches. But change the dress as you will it cannot change the sex. It can bring you to a kind of truth, though, for clothes may not make the man but they let him do the work he is fit to do. Put them on a woman and they bulge in the wrong places."

And Lucius, to be saying something, "What, then, is a man to do?"

"He may do one of three things. Have you noticed we are always hoisted in threes, the mystical, the feminine number? He can whip her. In this state you may legally use a rod no larger than your little finger. He can go abroad exposed. Both are public and so beg the question. Or he can just lie in bed. A man is hard

put to it to betray the past, and so Eddie made his bed in the mountains, where God knows there is privacy enough to hide any shortcomings.

"But would she leave him alone there?" For the first time Jack's tone became personal and harsh. "No, she sends their boy ten times outgrown the womb to remind him. What are you going to do with a woman moon-struck? Fingers are cut sinking a cold passion into sorrow's fresh sheath. Well, hay de dey, all things work themselves out, but not to the end wished for or planned."

"Then why did you come," the boy asked. "If you knew all this?"

"Eddie was in trouble. I didn't mean to betray my youth."

They had come to the fringe of the forest and could see the house. Through the interlaced twigs and leaves it looked like a love cottage in a valentine, and then they stepped into the open: in front of them the two rooms on either side of the dog run of hewn cedar, now the color of rock, with slanting steps and a small porch covered with vines reaching to the roof but not enough to hide the gray rot of the boards, so that the vines seemed to be supporting the roof only to consume it. A woman was leaning over a rub board in the yard, the black pot tilted in the smoldering chunks, and wooden tubs to hand. Behind her, set squarely forward in the trot, sat a man with a white beard, and his chest a stiff whiteness. "Don't think," Jack said as they approached, "all the trouble is at the tollgate or on the Peaks of Laurel. It's in the fat lands too."

Increasing his stride, he hailed the couple with a cheerful, bluff greeting. "Well now, there's a domestic scene I like to see, the division of labor plain to all: mind and body working together, the one contemplative, the other in movement, one fouling up the world, the other cleaning it up. Hiya there, Rutter." He raised his voice to a great bullying cheer. "You worn out all the land from here to Indiany you have to come back to beat down the mountains?" And waving his hand, "How do you live with him, Mrs. Rutter?"

The woman looked blankly at the intruders and then slowly

raised her long languid stick of a body upright but kept, to Lucius's amazement, her shoulders still hunched over the rub board and her hands folded among the wet garments. Three black dogs rushed from under the house, barking; but at a strange guttural noise from the porch dropped behind the woman, growling low in their throats and their coarse hair bristling.

"Don't you know me, Sister Rutter?" Jack asked as they approached the rotting fence. "You look as peart as the day he brought you to make a crop for me, sitting high in the bedclothes, the chaps crawling like tobacco worms, one of them falling under the wheels and you hollowing and Nate, fretted with an ill-matched team, allowing he didn't aim to raise them all noways."

She lifted the garment, squeezing it slowly, and her effort at recollection was in the tempo of her hands. She dropped the twist of clothing into a tub. "Why I be," she said in a high whine, "Mister Jack Croleigh, for fair."

Jack pulled the half-open bottom-hinged gate all the way back, and the plow points clanked. The woman was wiping her red hands on her apron as he came up. He saluted her and nodded to the porch. "Anybody marrying or dead around here?"

Lucius saw what his uncle had seen at a glance: Nate Rutter in faded jeans, barefooted, fitted tightly into a chair smooth-brown from age and use. A stiff white shirt lifted his beard into a gleaming strut.

"Naw, sir," she said. "The man wants a biled shirt ever day. It's all I can do to grabble around for meat to grease our bellies, let alone washing and arning a shirt ever day. But have it he will."

Barely hearing her out, Jack said, "Well, I must shake his hand. I've never known a man to sit always dressed for his funeral."

He strode towards the slanting steps. The woman stood for a moment as if left adrift in the backwash of his motion and then Lucius felt her shift to him with an insistent interest. He did not look at her right away but felt, as if she had thrown it about him, the power in her ungainly body. Her hands, he could not believe what he saw: they hung to her knees. It was this deformity which

had given her the appearance at the rub board of leaning over as she stood up. "And you, young man?" she asked in a tone bold as well as whining. Lucius met her eyes. They narrowed; then turned as wet as suds.

"I'm Lucius Cree."

At once he felt sorry he had given her his name.

"Well now," she whined. "Miss Jule's boy. The last time I seen you, you was running around like a little piss ant been blowed out of line. But you've growed big enough to know what you was made for." Her eyes washed over him with a slow careful scrutiny, over his thighs, his crotch . . . "And your ma, I aint seen her since old Belle had pups. A good woman, always helping out with herbs and sich when the young ones was a-punying, and did a body need a dusting of meal she didn't begrudge it, or thread and needles was the peddler late." She caught her breath: "And how is Miss Jule?"

"Well, thank you," he said quickly, feeling the need to withdraw.

Jack called from the porch, "You got old Nate rooting for snakes? An old boar he is. All I can get out of him is a grunt."

It was not Jack's word which made her turn. It was something in his hand. It looked like a string of popcorn. Before Lucius could take it in, the woman was hurrying towards it, her head lifted upon her straining neck, her long clumsy body jerking as if she walked on stilts, too rapidly. It was not so much the soft dry rattle as the look he got of her face which gave him the feeling of something dangerous here and he knew that whatever it was the woman was the center of it. Her hand fastened about the string with a snap, but she held it before her as if it were perishable as breath.

It was snake tails plaited like a plume hanging upside down. In a chiding tone she was saying, "I've never seen the like of sarpints this dry spell has brought to the house. Why, Mister Croleigh, they are as common as chinch bugs."

Very gently she lifted a tail that counted nine rattles. "This hearn I killed with the axe under the wood pile. Aint he a grand-daddy? He was fat enough to eat, all quailed up and his head

drawed back and his slick old body as stiff as you know what." She leered at Jack and winked. "Hit was a sorry to me to chop it off. . . . This'n Ada Belle, she's my oldest and no more skeered of snakes than a holiness preacher, mashed nigh the foot of the man. A body has to step light hereabouts."

She let the plumed string fall caressingly through her fingers. "They are mainliest old rattlers," she said sadly. "About light I woke up and the bed smelling of a cucumber patch on a dewy morning. I drawed back to kick at the man. If I had of thought I should have knowed better, for he can't lift a leg for nothing since the Lord struck him in Indiany and him hopeless as a baby, crippled and his tongue no more good to him than a grease rag in his mouth—the Lord did leave him his hearing. I'd kick and he'd grunt, and then it come to me. That warn't no stale fart. It was a sarpint crawled in with us."

She turned her moisty eye upon Nate Rutter. The old man's hands were trembling, clutching and unclutching the arms of his chair, except that his hands were unable to grasp it. The stick lay useless between his legs. Still with her eye upon him, leaning a little forward and giving the string of rattles a loving shake, Lucius saw that she seemed younger, a pinkish brown flush across her cheekbones and under the eyes the dark swell of poison in the blood.

"I sat up in bed," she resumed, "and there was the varmint or critter, I've never knowed how to name it, a-lifting hit's lazy old head, its eyes beady as candy, and that forked tongue a-flickering at me like it'd found water." Nate Rutter raised his hand as if it were straining under a weight and brushed it clumsily across the wetness of his mouth. She regarded him. "It was a sight now, the man trying to kiver himself with the quilts, his fangers in a strut and the quilts as slippery as elum. I hollowed." She paused, making sure that Nate Rutter had time to reflect on this, then, "My boy Othel shot its head off. It was purty, a-lashing its old round body and a-flanging the blood, quailing and unquailing, trying to run and not nothing to show hit where."

She sighed.

"Othel's a good shot," Jack said.

"A gift," she replied.

Jack picked up a chair, turned it around and sat with his legs forward and his arms on the chair back. He spoke slowly, with that gentle incisive voice of command Lucius recognized in his father but had rarely heard his uncle use. "Now, Sister Rutter, Eddie Dunbaugh aint going to let his cattle perish. We've come up here to dig him a well. You keep Othel to the house until we pull up water. If after that Eddie brings his cows to the Tilford Springs, and don't think I don't know, sister, how Pete Legrand got those springs, then, as I say, shoot him if you want to. I wash my hands of the matter." He paused and his voice grew languid, "But if anything happens to Eddie before that time, I'll see that Othel hangs."

Ada Rutter's sight filmed over. She turned and, the floor boards softly creaking as she passed, walked over and hung the snake skins on a peg beside the open trot. Giving her time to find a chair and sit in it, and time to reflect, Jack resumed, "I'm like the Roman, madam, I will wash my hands of it. This will be more charitable, and charity is one of the theological virtues."

"Mister Croleigh, you talk big like a preacher."

"You do believe in virtue, Sister Rutter?"

She pressed her dress at the knees, smoothing it with her large hands down to the anklebone. "A body does the best she can, Mister Croleigh."

Jack said abruptly, "Who made this trade with Pete Legrand, you or Nate?"

"The man generally does the trading," she said, turning her wedding ring, bright and worn from the suds.

"How can he trade and only grunt?"

"I make it out," and she brought her glance level with Jack's.

"You talk for him, then."

"You might say I made him and Mister Legrand understand one another."

"I see," Jack said. "Well, you make Nate understand what I've told you."

She raised her head and looked over the yard into the trees. "I'm, you might say, a widow who sets always with the body of her man. He can't make water thout I help him."

Nate waveringly struck at her, but the cane clattered to the floor. She reached over and picked it up and put it back between his legs. "He's fretful as a baby," she said.

"Just don't forget," Jack said softly.

She raised her hand to her throat and fingered the portrait pin of a broad-faced young man, hair short and bristling, eyes open and startled . . . and then the whine, "I aint after no harm to Mister Dunbaugh. He's been right neighborly, sending meat ever time he killed. He's helped us right smart in other ways, showing us what ground is fitten for what, what little patches goes with this old house. And since he been looking after the cattle, folks stopped throwing rocks at the house. A woman without a man gets unheartened. But I'm done reached the end of my row, Mister Croleigh. We leave this house we aint no place to go to, and I don't aim to take to the road no more. Time comes when a body has got to set down, even if she aint nothing but a mountaintop, and only a boy for de-pendence.

She was quiet for a while.

"It looked like we couldn't get us a toe hold nowhere. Soon's the man would wear out one farm, he'd move on to the next. He taken pleasure working a farm to the hardpan. The first year he ginerally made a good showing, according to the season. —We'll make it on the next place, he'd say. And me with youngons buried from here to Indiany, for he plowed me as hard as he plowed aer man's field. Lemuel died of the white swelling on the edge of Tennessee. Mamie Lou taken the bloody flux somewhars in Kentucky. We couldn't git enough straw to keep her little pallet clean. Her insides all wanted out. I laid them all away, for one cause or another, and some for no cause a-tall."

Her whine had the rhythmic monotone of sorrow pounded to the husk.

"Nine times I come to the straw. Six times I heard the nails

go into the coffin boards, and sometimes no more than a piece of quilt to make it rest a little easy. Was the last one, though, the one that come late in my season, I study about. A peart one from the start. Even the man would dandle it. Hit just punied away, a-smiling s'bright. I'd fry it pieces of middling, that was all it wanted, but nothing I done would unlock its bowels. A kind neighbor for comfort's sake said locked bowels would fatten it, but hit never done it. She swole up big as a bladder and, you might say, busted loose. You never seen the sight of stuff come out of her. By sun she was dead."

Ada Rutter rocked her body to and fro.

"We never done no good after that. Crops would fail or the man never got them out. He blamed me for his force dying on him. Then the gals taken to running after the boys. The day the man fell out in a fit I was glad for the buckets of syrups, the side meat the boys would brang by. But home country is the place to be in trouble. I liked not to a made it. No, sir, Mister Dunbaugh has been like a present to us, but Mister Legrand's our bread."

Jack pulled two fruit jars out of his shirt. "Woman's had as much trouble as you needs a drink."

"Well now." The whine left her voice. "That's right kind of you, Mister Jack. I wouldn't mind to ranse this snuff out of my mouth."

Ada's long step took her quickly through the dog trot, and she entered the kitchen for mugs and the water bucket. Lucius watched her disappear, confused by the sudden reversal of attitude attending what he had thought the cruel levity of Jack's proffer. He said, "Let's get out of here."

"Now wait," Jack replied evenly.

"What for? To see you get drunk with this creature?"

"You think I think liquor will cure any sorrow?"

"I think you had better save it."

"It will keep, but the occasion never keeps."

"For a better occasion then."

Jack walked over and looked into the window of one of the

rooms. When he returned he said, "Old Ada has had a tough time of it."

"When you hang her son?"

"You think that will be tougher? And then—I need to meet this Othel. Maybe he takes a drink."

Lucius looked squarely at his uncle, his sympathy for once adrift. Did the Peaks of Laurel have a climate all its own in which the familiar presented a strange unaccountable face? Jack returned his look, said quietly, "Ada's feeling sorry for herself, that sweet kind of sorrow that don't hurt any more. Rhetorical sorrow, I call it. Not that it aint true, but what she's making of it is another truth."

"Truth. Look, all we came to do was find water and dig a well."

"I'm the witch," Jack said. "You let me decide on the water."

"If you'd just stick to water . . ."

The floor boards gave with the sloughing rhythm of Ada's return, and Lucius feeling the need for some assurance appealed mutely to his uncle. Jack, whispering, "Go to camp and get more liquor. We'll need it."

"Don't include me, please."

Jack took him by the arm and carried him to the edge of the porch. "Quick now. If I can get Othel drunk enough . . . Get it."

"You mean he can't shoot?"

"Remember what we are here for." Jack was peremptory, for Ada was upon them. "Well, sister, here you come with the bucket to water it down. This high perch I looked for you to take your spirits straight."

"Ooooo, Mister Jack. I aint that stout."

"Well, sister, hold out your mug and I'll pour you a little strength."

Lucius saw that he had slipped away unnoticed, and soon the trees masked him entirely. What they were there for was the question he put to himself on the way to camp, but nothing made much sense. They had come to dig a well they would never dig and

found themselves on a mission to keep a man from being shot, when that man's son dallied in the woods with the girl of the family who would shoot him. Not that it seemed to worry Eddie Dunbaugh, either. And Jack, after threatening a woman with her son's hanging, he had left sloshing drinks into pewter cups, the rub board and tubs forgotten in the yard, the clothes lying like pollution in the still and greasy water. How was that getting Othel too drunk to shoot? . . . He could not get the look of that water from his mind, any more than he could the sense that he was not going away from but towards some crisis, obscure and certainly involved, but his own involvement he did not see.

He quickened his pace. His heart beat a little faster. The day was fine, not yet hot, and the sun fell in bright fragments through the trees upon the faint green path at his feet. This was pleasant, his delight in it simple enough. He would no longer bother about dangers and complexities which had nothing to do with himself. The supple movement of his legs made him feel again as he had that morning, standing in the loft room at the tollgate. He felt the strength in his crotch and a warmth there. At once and in spite of himself Ada Rutter's eyes plastered his body, and all alone with himself in the woods he tingled in his flesh and shook his head to banish the meaning of her glance, repulsive but exciting. It probed a softness in him. He had already on the climb learned his physical lack. Jeff's body knew things by instinct; his easy control of it, he supposed, was part of what he liked about him. But Jeff could not remember when he had not been big enough to lift and follow a team. In some basic way he was more of a man. . . . Lucius thought about and was slow to accept this, though. His mother said people were called to different occupations by birth. There were the plain people, she said, and there were the Croleighs and the Crees. He had hated the bland assumption of her attitude. How did the simple, natural ways of the Dunbaughs and the Tilfords make them so much different? And after all, his great aunt had married a Tilford.

Walking along, he wondered if things were always simple with

Jeff. Did Jeff feel one thing and hide it to fit the ways of the cove and mountain? He never showed much affection and yet he knew they were friends, just as he never made any pets of animals. A hound was a good hound if it hunted well. A cow had certain qualities, or she lacked them. Could it be this simple measurement was his protection against the immensity of the world, the great literal inquiry which Jeff put before himself as certain insects put forth their feelers, and so reduce the irreducible largeness and multiplicity of things, inch by inch, to their size and need?

Suppose the millions of insects, now making the woods vibrant, set about relating sounds not their own to themselves? That way was hopeless confusion. And the animals, the grunting hogs he could hear in the laurel. No, there was not time enough. He stopped with the knowledge of this truth happened upon and, drawn out of his thoughts, seeing again, he noticed he had wandered from the path . . . to a steep declivity, where the mountain fell away into one of its many ravines. On every side the laurel stood up like an unclipped hedge, its smooth thick leaves disclosing the tangle of its branched depths, shutting him in, barring further progress

his senses now had ears. To his left the laurel divided. There was no clear worn path, but it was a way that had been used. He went towards it, without will or intention, the strokes of his blood slow and pounding his ears. He was conscious of surprise at his breath. It pulled deep in his chest, as if he had been running. He was stopped by the polished green of a leaf. From behind it came the grunts of struggle or a flopping of great wings beating the ground and the high liquid fluttering birdlike abandoned voice. He saw his hand lift of its own volition, damp and trembling; saw the leaf shake with the other leaves as the branch went down upon the white thighs forked, split by the wedge of the falling body, the two hands crushed upon the streaming hair. And then the fluttering voice, grown to a frenzy, drowned all sight. He was staring at the trembling laurel. He shook in the spasm of his flesh.

On the path again his teeth grew quieter, but it was not until he had reached the busy silence of the stilled light that he could

feel the sun above and invisible, all-pervasive and sovereign, probing to drench the moist depths where the trees grew.

Things would never be the same again. He had had time to take this in, when he stepped onto the porch at the Rutters and set the whiskey at his uncle's feet, bustling and shifting around, hoping to supplant by this false energy the direct, frank gaze he usually presented to Jack for greeting. But his uncle had seen. "So," Jack said, "the rape of the eye is the beginning of knowledge."

Lucius did not answer. He dropped against the corner of the dog trot, and drew his lids into a sweet squeezing shudder, even now, this long afterwards, *It is not my shame, my guilt . . .* a languor, cocoon-soft, wound its frail strands until he was bound and he gave himself over to its daylight swoon, *the small feet, dirty and brown, dangling helplessly in air, undulating like seaweed upon the top of the swelling motion.* And then the restless gnaw began to go sour on him, and he began to hate Jeff for what he had done. Even his uncle seemed another person as, his eyes open now, seeking the old certainty, Jack swam into view, drawing the outspread length of each leg under him and, with a heave, raised his tangled head almost to the eaves. He swayed in a diminishing arc, like a clock running down. Steadying himself, Jack was regarding Othel Rutter with respect, as the little boy-man picked up the rifle to hold it as easily as a horse pistol. With a thumb as large as a quarter, he thrust the cartridge home. He took aim and fired. Out of the edge of the yard a hickory nut bounced through the branches, making a muffled click each time it struck, but it hit the ground softly.

Othel leaned the rifle against the slanting rail of the porch, turned and Lucius saw him, front-on. He was almost square, solid but shriveled, his face a slick pale brown and lined with seams as fine as a hair.

Othel spoke to Jack. "You owing me another." His voice was high and thin. He thrust the mug towards Jack.

"Is your belly a sieve, boy?" Jack asked thickly.

With great care, as if a sudden jar would topple his head, Jack leaned over and picked up the jug. He paused and measured the distance between them.

"It's two and a half steps," Lucius said. "You make it three you'll bruise yourself."

"Hah," Jack said, his eyes glistening heavily. "The looks of a thing aint necessarily the thing."

"I reckon that's so," Lucius said with his best at low irony. "I'd never thought this little boy could have got you drunk."

"Nephew, you speak too lightly of this hero." He turned abruptly. "Othel, boy, is that cup held forth in pride or need? Have I wandered back in time, into the dark afterbirth of the world, where objects animate and inanimate pull together at the common dug? It's plain you aint human. No bigger than a pine knot, you can't drink round agen round with me and still knock a nut I can't even see to the ground. You ought put him in a circus, Miss Ada."

She had come into the trot and was standing, taller than a man, in its shade, her neck lifted out of its yolk like a turkey's. "You ought both be in a circus. Barnum's best attraction since the Swedish mockingbird."

"Nightingale," Lucius corrected.

"I aint never seen one," Jack replied.

Ada Rutter touched the portrait broach at her throat. "When I was a gal, some lowed I flitted like a bird."

"You owing me a drink," Othel repeated.

"Whar's your manners, son?" Ada reprimanded him politely.

Jack carefully poured the whiskey into the boy's cup and then drank his own, and threw the jug to Lucius, who barely caught it. "Get up, Lucius, and pour Miss Ada a drink. And pour yourself one. Ever since you got in you been lying like a messenger moulting his wings. Salute cups with the great American mock bird. Maybe she'll sing you into a tree. Anything can happen on the Peaks of Laurel, where women drop pine knots for sons and daughters green as mistletoe."

With exaggerated gallantry Lucius poured Ada Rutter a drink and then forced himself to drink the burning potion, holding his breath to keep it down, as his throat fired less and his stomach began to relax under the warmth spreading way down.

"Pour her another," Jack commanded.

"Law, law, I don't need nair nother," she said, waving the cup about as if there were no place to put it.

Lucius poured and bowed, his head filling with air and his feet light and tingling.

"A miracle," Jack said and dropped into his chair. "I see its shape, some rare bird clutching nut in beak and swooping down to the ravishing lips of her coral ear. Tell me, Miss Ada, do you recollect any such time you was asleep in the woods and roused up with great wings hovering and fluttering between you and a patch of sky?"

Solemnly Ada Rutter rolled her eyes. "Seems like I ricollect oncet in cotton chopping time drawing back into the shade to blow a spell."

"Aaah," Jack said and raised his hand for silence.

"To the great diviner," Lucius said, feeling very gay now. He raised the jug and, gulping, heaved once but once only. Dropping his hand upon Jack's shoulder, "Knows the past. Can read the future. Every mind an open book. Mrs. Rutter's a tender leaf."

"Law, listen at that boy. He's sure kin to *you*, Mister Jack, whataer they say."

Jack cut his eyes at her briefly; then, "Lucius, you don't have to drink it all at one time."

"Into the shade she withdrew" . . . the words slipped out so easily Lucius repeated himself, "Out of the sun's hot embrace, into the shade."

"A locust grove," Ada said with becoming modesty. "And the ground s'oft seemed like it wanted to favor me. I laid back and drew my skirt over my head to catch me a wink."

"And you awoke, the bird's great wings fanning," Jack intoned, leaning far forward, his great body twisted as if bound to its agony.

"I don't ricollect no such," she replied, weaving her hands. "I ricollect dreaming a old gobbler was a-flogging me."

"Our native American bird," Lucius whispered, putting his finger beside his nose.

"I didn't have no stick. When I didn't reach for nairn and didn't run and the flogging didn't hurt me none, I knowed I was a-dreaming. I said to myself—Why this old gobbler aint a-flogging. He's a-treading. The words made me come to myself. Law, law, it was nobody but Mister Rutter jist a-ragging away."

"And so little Othel was begot," Jack intoned, "out of the common dream."

"No dreaming in them days," Ada said with pride. "The man would no more than hit the kivers afore he'd rag a body. He got that Othel s'quick I liked not to a knowed it."

The rifle went off and Lucius turned to see a twig this time fall lightly through the branches and catch among the leaves. Jack motioned vaguely towards the cups. Othel, turning, wavered and in reaching for his mug knocked it into the yard.

"Here, take the jug," Lucius said to him quickly. At last his uncle's plan was working. Maybe now Othel would be too drunk to shoot at the spring. Close up offering the jug, Lucius looked into his face. It was like a persimmon after frost, except for the color. That was sallow, almost sickly.

"Him now," Othel lowered the jug and jerked his head towards Jack.

"Allow me first to salute the witch," Lucius said, "who can read strange things in our waters."

Othel made no response. His gaze was as steady as a sloth's.

"You needn't of had the trouble to bring it so far," Jack said gruffly, "if you aimed to drink it all yourself."

"Him," Othel repeated and pointed a long slick finger at the older man. That motion unsettled him and he sat with a thud upon the puncheon floor.

"Mammy," he wailed. "Mammy." His face was upturned to Ada's like a frightened child's. "My feet ruint. I can't shoot thout

I stand." Ada picked up the rifle. "You won't let it git me, mammy?"

Jack pulled himself upright in his chair. "The balance of nature is restored, madam. Let us together re-enter the natural world."

"Law, law, Mister Jack, you gone and got my baby boy drunk as a coot. For shame, a big growed man taking advantage," and she pulled Othel to his feet, shaking him and patting him and giving him back the rifle. "Now go set down until your toes can grip the ground again." Othel looked back at his mother, questioningly. She shook her head. "Mammy'll not let nothing bother you."

He began to cry. Soothingly she said, "Mammy'll not let it git it."

Jack watched Othel depart, dragging the gun as a child drags a toy, wobbling like a child not sure of his feet. With a hearty voice, standing now, appearing almost sober, he addressed Lucius although he looked straight at Ada Rutter. "Give her a repeat for solace, son."

Ada did not bat an eye. "You're right kind, Mister Croleigh. I don't care if I do. This here's an awful dry family I got and you so free and all with your liquor, I hope you got a still working for you somewheres." She tossed off her drink, the very manner of it, swallowing it down like water and this time without putting any water in it, gave the one gesture to show what unsure grounds Jack's ruse rested upon.

"You're a smart woman, Miss Ada," Jack said soberly. "The still don't run can take care of your family needs."

"I aint smart," she said mildly. "I git hongry. I've knowed thirst,"

then lifting her eyes to the woods, and Lucius had the sense that she had been watching there all along. "There comes that Ruthy and that boy. She been gone so long I be bound the meat's done blowed."

Jack followed her gaze now. "Well, beat up anyhow," he said.

Lucius dared not look. What they had done would mark them all over and reach for him, the witness, and he would stand exposed

in their shame and knowledge. He could feel Jack's inquisitive eyes draw the couple, as if he held them between the forks of his wand. Lucius could no longer restrain himself. He looked, quickly and away; then in wonderment he found himself gazing steadily. *They bore no mark or sign.* Jeff was coming on in his usual way, in some sort disarrayed but no more than if the starch had gone out of his clothes. The sack of meat fell indifferently over his shoulder, while behind the girl followed, dappled by the light, so that she seemed to be appearing and disappearing among the leaves. Excited by what he saw and bewildered, too, Lucius felt close to some mystery. *To look at them, nobody could tell.* Was this it then? Had he come up here to find this out? That people filled up the day, pretending that what they did mattered, when all along only the private things, the things done in secret, were what you cherished, what you lived for?

he stepped forward to greet them

when from behind and beyond the smokehouse the woods, crackling and crashing, stopped him. He heard the crack of the whip and its cutting whoosh which always draws blood; he heard the cattleman's shout, and the second time since his climb he turned to find cattle breaking through into the open; but this time they did not stop to graze. The farther trees swallowed them up, the calm returned and there was Eddie Dunbaugh drawing up the calico pony at the edge of the yard, coiling the whip about his shoulder, his little eyes as dark as two currants in the broad and doughy face.

And there he sat his mount like the man of the mountains and all those who moved were tenants to his will. All this pride and self-assurance, and but for his Uncle Jack he would even now be lying in the dirt dead, or bleeding to death. And to think he had misunderstood Jack. This thought sobered Lucius, for he had halfway made up his mind not to bring back the whiskey. But he was drawn to the Rutters, and he might as well admit to himself why and from what cause.

The haze of the spending day coupled with the air. The pony

shivered into a stance of arrested motion; the girl Ruthy held poised, her head cast down but her body alert, as if on the point of flight. Then Eddie gradually turned towards her. From the porch Ada Rutter cleared her throat. As if this was the signal, Ruthy moved towards the rear of the cabin. *It's going to happen*, and the very rhythm of her movement, the flight that will be stopped, broke the spell and Eddie's voice sped after her. "Ruthy gal," it said and she paused, her head still inclined away from him. She did not turn.

He repeated her name and the name now wrapped in the naked plea of his wants stripped him before them all. He waited a moment in the great shapeless bulk of fat and muscle, like a savage chief condemned always to parade his privacy before the general gaze. He and the girl might have been alone in the yard, for so did his arrogance or desperation ignore the fact of spectators. "I've a turn of meat for you, Ruthy. Hop up behind and we'll fetch it." He did not raise his voice.

Lucius now felt he had to call out, tell him, as Eddie waited, not yet understanding. The sense of something amiss was all he showed, while the silence thickened, glued the witnesses to the slant of their eyes, and Ada Rutter's glance had withdrawn like a spider into its corner. Then Eddie threw his head back and looked about. He looked at those on the porch in a puzzled way, and then he found his son. He saw the meat hanging low, pulling Jeff's forearm tight. It took only a glance. He sank his bulk into the pony and the pony flowed through the broken fence and halted delicately before the girl. With the handle of the whip he lifted her chin and leaned down upon her. The girl froze like a bird but at last got it out: "Jeff toted it home for me."

It seemed as if he would hold her chin forever upturned; then the slick worn handle moved like an amber shadow away. The girl disappeared. There was nothing for the rest of them to do but wait—Lucius, Jack, Ada, old Nate at the window, waiting upon the heavy head lying over on its chin and the shoulders drooping all their dead weight, the pony as still as if in its animal way it understood

so much as a twitch would jar the head off its limber neck. Then the head came up and it was there, the full knowledge of his shame curdling his eyes.

Jeff was standing there between the yard and woods, swaying ever so slightly, leaning backwards as if reaching for a more solid air to support him. Those on the porch looked and yet did not look at him. Already Eddie and his son were two parts of an action begun. At last Eddie swung round. "I'll larn you to cut into my meat," he growled, and as he spoke, the bull whip uncoiled, lazily, and time slowed to its movement. Then instantly the streak of the stinging hide lay straight out from the arm, and the dust was rising in a faint spiral along Jeff's waist. The boy trembled once down to the ground; but, as the dark hide shuddered to unwind itself, Jeff raised his hand and let it slide over the whip going slack. "I don't aim for you to whip me no more," he said and gripped it.

Eddie gave a vicious tug which brought Jeff a step forward. For a moment they faced each other across the binding cord, one end flapping against the protuberant belly, the other jerking towards release. Then Eddie spoke to the pony and the pony rose over the fence, kicking the palings.

"Law, law," Ada said. "He aims to drag that boy."

Jeff fell but was up and running, looping the raw hide about his hand, circling the tree as the pony passed. Eddie hit the ground, to bounce up and with the light grace of a fat man descended upon his son. Their arms were about each other; their feet, gripping, danced over the ground.

It was not that Lucius knew he was seeing what no man ought to see that did it. Nor was it Eddie who with a balanced fury was tossing his son like a sack of straw that did it either, with Jeff's arms still about the older man's back and his fingers straining so that any moment he looked to see the bones shatter. It was later, after Eddie had slowed down, his breath pumping like a leaky bellows, his footwork grown clumsy, with Jeff still holding on, when Eddie tripped and fell and Jeff clamped holding him down

and looking up as if somebody should tell him what next to do. At last he got up with relief but in all the change that, in the last few minutes, had come to him. He looked away from his father, and Eddie lying stilled and Lucius not breathing until with a grunt Eddie leaned first on his elbow and finally, after several tries, mounted the pony but even yet waited under his sagging shoulders until the silence gathered to bury him there. It was not even this, not quite. But when the pony leaped the wash pot as through a paper hoop, kicking over one of the tubs and the gray water spilling over the ground and the twists of clothes hanging, half in the tub and half in the dirt, the pony heading for the woods as if it were drunk, its back swayed under the impossible burden, Eddie no longer flesh of its flesh, but reeling clumsily, sliding out of rhythm, with no more resiliency than a heavy bundle tied loosely to its back, then this did it. Lucius turned to his uncle. "But why?" He whispered.

Is the mystery to be so simply told? Is the mystery ever told, even in the acting of it? Then certainly, when the acting is only seen, not partaken of, even if the friend is another self, and this Lucius doubted now without knowing he doubted, only feeling alone and apart with himself in the backwash of the violence, the consanguinial link of arms; not in love, nor out of love, but out of a fated older need; and Jeff, breathing hard, no longer feeling for the air to support him but standing in it and breathing it with the unconcern of one who moves at last in his own right, then certainly he should have let it alone. But he asked again, "Why?" And again, "What?"

But could he be heard? Could even the violence be remembered, even though the leaves were still fluttering from the pony's flight, with Ada striding like a man but not in a man's kind of haste, her long glide stretching the calico skirt faded from so many washings, not beyond color but out of ever having had any color, so that the calico blended with the only thing it could blend with, the ground, and even then not so much blend as seem the ground's

shadow, now flopping, now taut, according to her motion which never left its course but went straight to Jeff who looked again like a boy as she began to handle him, brush him off, turn him around and talking, "I de-clare, that old bull a-hooking his own, a-floundering through my yard, his cattle tromping my flowers and my ash hopper plumb ruind and my tubs never hold water again and all that washing lying in the dirt," and looking now not at Jeff but at her broken tub and spilled clothes; and Jeff moving away from her as from a force of nature, not blushing but with the dry leathern look of his skin glowing as if it had been fresh greased.

"Now, you've seen enough for one day," Jack said, reaching around for the jug, but not bending down to get it, as if he expected it to lift itself into his finger. "Let the boy alone, Miss Ada. For Jesus' sake, you think you can dust off what's been done?" But Jeff was already walking to the house, where he backed up to the porch and the porch seemed to reach out for his seat, so easily did he come to rest. And Ada Rutter, forgetting them all, picking up her washtubs, grumbling aloud, her long arms making her stoop slightly as she picked up a man's long underwear to wring it as if she were wringing a neck. "Yes, you've seen enough," Jack said, "but it's only the beginning."

He drank and banged the jug upon the floor and looked at his nephew. Then he spoke, slowly, doubtful of loosening the words crowding his teeth. "I've the eye of a hawk can see a dime on the ground from the air's perch a mile up. My nose is as refined as a buzzard's. I've the touch of the blind, the ear of a watchdog and no invalid can show a better palate. In all, a gifted sensibility. But do you think I know? Sure, I know what any man that keeps above ground knows. But do you think I can impart this knowledge? Christ, boy, even Jesus spoke in parables."

"Why?" Not stubbornly this time, not insistent even but from an impulsion as simple, as unsimple as a pulse beat.

"All right," Jack said. For a moment he fixed a steady gaze upon the slight grace of his nephew, upon the eyes as demanding as a target. "All right. If I had witchery with words and could make

them ring with the only, the exact meaning, which neither I nor any man can do; and if you had an ear true enough to record the sounds, which you don't, I could speak and you would hear and still not understand. But the moment will come, and you will know." He seemed to study the quality of dusk, now fast increasing, then, "You are shocked that father and son could forget the dues of blood. You ask yourself is this special, is it a station not of your station, and this thought sets you adrift, for at your age where the heart goes it must meet with no strangeness. And yet the time is nigh when you will not know the familiar from the strange."

He paused and carefully offered his nephew a drink, and when Lucius shook his head, Jack thrust the jug a little closer, and this time he drank. "That's a little bracer for what's to come. All right. There's an odor makes all blood unkin. And no man can tell its season. Only the beast knows his season, but for a man it is all the time and any time."

Jeff got up and walked into the house.

Jack was now hugging the jug in his lap, leaning over it, brooding, seeming to forget his nephew in whatever speculation engaged him. "That the begetter and the begotten could probe the same blind channel," he said abruptly. "Mix up time. That's the paradox, the contradiction, and the truth which only a miracle's logic makes acceptable. That's what you think, or try to think, as you think that the father's blood runs pure in the begotten flesh, to whom the father gives his name so that he can rest his feet under his own table and wash his victuals down with buttermilk, and the belch come up and not down. But what part of the body is a name? Does it swell like a muscle, bend like a joint? Does it love the dark like the bone, the secret and purblind bone, that self-begetter, sprinkled into the dark, immaculate before the rich and turgid flow which perforce withdraws into the flesh, the incorruptible swathed in corruptibility, and when the time comes, out of the blind and constant heat of the womb, carrying its bud of flesh into the light of day, to dwell there, until at last like the mole roots up its mounded groove, not one fraction of a hair more of dirt

than it needs, in that solid, blind, breathless eternal planting where it waits, not on time, nor on space which it has confined and thus denied, but on the Promise and the Word?"

Jack was breathing like a wind-broke horse. He looked down and then at his nephew as if his look could give him learning. "Does a name," he asked, "father, son, Lucius, Jeff hang anywhere there? Is it more than a pause in breath, heard maybe, but not seen, with no handle to take ahold of? Is it spoken in the womb? I will say, for this matter can in some way be put into speech, there's not but one blood and one weaning. A man child pulls at the cord. The milk dries at the teat. But is it free? Is the child weaned because he no longer sucks but gums his potlicker and bread? Does that rid him of the blood pumped into him from his mother's heart? And when his own heart is shocked by the chill wide open air of the world into doing its own pumping, is he any more free of the sound of that other, that first regular stroke, blind, steady, forever beating where it hovers?"

Jack drew deep of the air.

"No. There's only one weaning, and that you've just seen. The father's back touches the ground and the boy rises up a man. But on top or bottom it's the same old blood."

He got up and stumbled towards the shed room. He paused at the entry, his large hand on the lintel. "I'm loaded with spirits. I'm going to lay me down for a spell. When I wake up, let us hope the spirit will have transmogrified into flesh. That metamorphosis, my young kinsman . . ." He did not complete the sentence. His body, as if moved by another's will, swung around and disappeared.

Lucius heard the body fall into bed, the bed ropes cry and the light dry rustle. He heard it to the accompaniment of his uncle's words still whirling in his head and he went over and took a long drink, to wash them away or down, anywhere didn't matter, so long as his mind was cleared of what he did not understand but had to understand, because he knew they were made for a warning and a mile post. When he lowered the jug, a little dazed, it was taken out of his hand. Jeff was turning it up to his lips.

"That uncle of yours," Jeff said, when his mouth was free. "His mouth's loose as a goose."

They walked into the yard. He felt things between them could be made simple and clear again. One thing delayed this. Now that they were alone after the long mixed-up day, he would have to tell him. But not yet. They ambled about, waiting for the right time, and he felt the dark motes of evening sifting, not from above or below but along and through the sightless air, without beginning or ending either, not even spreading, only thickening out of themselves. Up past the trees about the yard he saw the evening star. He looked down and whispered, "It's like at the bottom of a well."

Jeff reached through with his voice. "Once I thought the old man had me. All his juice aint dried by no means."

Then Lucius said it. "I saw you."

"You aint blind."

"I mean I saw you and Ruthy in the laurel."

He had gotten it out, the apology and the plea.

Jeff spat. "I aint got no deed to it."

Lucius was some moments taking this in; then lightly touched Jeff's shoulder. "You mean . . . ?"

"It's no turnpike. Nor no briar patch neither."

He felt a fresh surge of affection and closeness, the old warmth that had somehow got lost on the way, a sympathy, inviolate and masculine, at this offer to share the girl. And yet, if this was so, if a man would share a girl, even with a friend, with no more feeling than he would his bread, what was it then? And what his discovery about the real things being secret and all else an acting before others to hide and disguise? Or friendship, was it the greatest thing after all? Jeff must say, but he asked instead, "How can you do it with this girl, and her brother about to shoot your father?"

"You think I let at ar little piss ant shoot pappy?"

"He would have if Uncle Jack hadn't passed Othel out." And then he heard himself stumbling blindly, "But you, your father, Ruthy and all."

Jeff was trying hard to follow. He said, "It's not them. It's that

Pete Legrand made all the trouble. Who he think he is to have all the water to himself, and he not needing it?"

It was not until later, after they had eaten in the lean-to kitchen of bare upright boards, still smelling of sap and the mill, and Ruthy had joined them on the porch, that Jeff made his meaning plain. He had dropped to the puncheons in one fluid motion, settling so lightly against the post that he seemed not to move but be translated there, his makings out and rolling a cigarette, in carriage and gesture unconsciously possessive, as if always he had been accustomed to sit at that spot, leaning against that one particular post. The night was light and the moon already in the sky. The girl was near but not too near, her legs hanging and swinging slowly and every now and then her glance stole towards the quiet impassive figure. Jeff gave no response. Lucius felt suddenly homesick. Behind him a chair scraped and Ada said, "You Othel, set in thar with your pappy. Soon's I cool me a spell, I'll put him to bed."

"The moon's strong and clear," Lucius said.

"The moon do aggrvate a body when he's young," Ada said. "To a woman now, hit's an aggrvation young or old." And after a pause, "Ada Belle be due in tomorrow. I looked for her today."

He could feel her meditatively regarding them ranged along the edge of the porch, thinking of some way to solve the insoluble number, when from inside the house animal sounds, impulsive and broken, and a stick rattling over the floor interrupted her meditation. "Othel don't understand his pappy fit for nothing," she said and went inside.

As if her departure was the signal, Jeff flipped his makings away and was standing. "Let's take a turn down by the spring," he said. Ruthy quietly dropped beside him. "Come on, Lucius," he said. She looked quickly at Jeff.

He felt his throat run dry. "I don't believe I'll go."

"Come on," Jeff repeated.

"Two's company."

"Come on."

He joined them. The three of them walked across the yard, out of the moonlight into the sudden dark of the trees. He could feel his heart, loud enough to hear, striking his ribs. The girl moved between them like a captive, her head bent over, gliding soundlessly over the path. They walked as secretly as conspirators. The cool milk light, where the trees broke, splashed their clothes, and their bodies wavered like shades along the twisting path. Then he saw Jeff drop down, as if snatched from below; then the girl; and he felt his own knees dip and strain and he was falling back but he put his hand against the ground. More carefully he descended the sudden grade, turning with the path around an upright looming shape he took for a limestone ledge. After this the ground became more level, the air damp and soft and underfoot it was spongy and moist. He had been aware of the tree frogs all along but now their song rose and fell in a swelling metallic drone, while from below the bullfrog's deep call calmed the vibrating night. Jeff held back a screen of willows, and they went through. It was like stepping into a lighted room.

At first the light showed only itself, and he was holding his breath. He let it out and his ears grew calmer, and then he began to see where he was. He could see the ground, the dry sticks even and the stones, those with moss and lichen on them but softened beyond their nature. Beyond this narrow strip a pool of mist rolled languidly against the warmer air, hiding the water which he could hear running off somewhere in the dark outside. Overhanging the cliff, which made the north side of the spring, a leafy tree, its substance dissolved by the moonlight, seemed to lean not itself but its shadow over the water. And then his vision, drawn to it, came to rest upon the pool's center. No mist rose there. There the water, swirling and surging out of the source, reflected the abyss beneath, its force in the silence, but the mystery and the terror, the sucking swirl over which the moonlight streaked like grease.

Near the edge Jeff and the girl were standing, molded by the light as by a jelly. She stood slightly raised on tiptoe. A twig breaking might, so delicate her poise, make her flee. He forgot what she

was and had done. Her small face rested in a warm glow, fuller and richer. The slight heaviness he had known as the way in which Jeff's strength showed itself was now gone. As he looked at him, he thought of his own carriage, erect, with head up, the way he had been trained to carry himself from the time his legs moved freely beneath him. He saw the difference; he almost understood the meaning of it: Jeff's chin thrust a little forward, the body curving at waist and groin, his middle drawn back ready to lean into the burden or the thrust. Wild sensual images drowned his senses. He said aloud, in a hoarse voice, "It's beautiful."

His voice released them. The girl moved first, walking to the edge of the mist and water. For a moment Jeff seemed not to know what to do with himself. And then stiffly, as if just awakened, he joined her.

It will be now, he thought.

He waited until at last Jeff reached up and with clumsy playfulness pulled her hair. His effort at playfulness made his voice brutal. "You got something Lucius wants."

She turned, startled; drew close questioning; their lips almost touched. Lucius, impaired by her movement, wanted to cry Stop! No! But he could only wait for what was to come, wait naked in his isolation, in the contraction of his manhood, in the shame of what he had allowed to happen, out of his ignorance and want, and receive her voice, flaying him, "Him? Him, Jeff?"

Jeff did not answer, but he was trembling now, he too caught, surprised in his blindness. And then the girl, waiting, leaning closer and raising her hand as if to brush away the moon's haze, studied Jeff's profile, for he had turned away, slowly turning to rock beneath her stare. Lucius out of his own fixity watched the girl withdraw, so lightly at first she scarcely moved, her small feet lapped by the mist, the thin smoke of it fingering her ankles. And then she whirled, raised her hands to her shoulders and snatched the light garment over her head. Jeff took a clumsy step towards her, but she was too quick. Lightly flowing, one leap placed her upon the single rock outjutting from the bank. There she stood an instant, her back to the pool, unsheathed, her slim hard body bathed by light,

no woman softness about her, ambiguous as a nymph, only the budding breasts to tell her sex, for from below the mist enclosed her. She turned and was moving into the pool, sinking into the mist but seeming to rise out of it as it foamed about her thighs and middle. She dove into the roiling center, came up, parting the cloudy surface, her white shoulders for a moment upright and still before she fell back, floating and diving, her arms as impalpable as the vapor she swam in. From the spring came a hoarse sound like a beast breathing, not one beast but the principle of beast, ubiquitous, unseen but lurking, yet held in leash, and now filling the emptiness of the moon-drenched space. As if it called her, the girl Ruthy rose upright, no girl but a being formed now of the vapor, and from the waist upwards surged gently towards the bank, in small gliding motions, as if propelled by the leisurely strokes of a fin. Raising her arms, she called to them, her voice gay and shrill, unresonant as a child's. "Come in washing. It's nice."

Jeff was partways in, furious, inarticulate. He made a motion with his arm. "Git out of that water."

Slowly now, like a child unreasonably corrected, she waded towards dry ground, her small shoulders drawn in, her body drooping and glistening. As soon as she was close enough, Jeff took her by the arm and jerked her out. He slapped her, his voice stifled and harsh, "Aint you no shame? Aint you no more shame than to git naked before us?"

She turned on him, biting and scratching and sobbing, while he held her away from him, shaking her regularly as he might an unbidable puppy. After a while she quit struggling. There was no sound about the spring except her sobs.

Quietly Lucius found the path which led to the house. From behind the willows, as he began the ascent, he could hear Jeff's voice still chiding but in a lower key. The girl did not answer him; but she was no longer weeping.

He was glad of the darkness of the path. He didn't care whether he kept to it or not; at first he didn't. And he took his time going back to the house, to make sure his face would show nothing of his

utter abandoned aloneness. He dragged along the dead weight of his body, a body spent which had not even begun to know what spending was. He would go to camp instead, except it was too far and he would not know how to get there at night. Jeff had tried, and she had taken it right out of his hands. She didn't even have to think what to do. She just stripped off and showed Jeff the meaning of what he had asked her to do. She had shocked his sense of propriety. It had shocked him, too. Maybe it had shocked more, showed Jeff what he felt about her. She wanted him, that was plain. Well, she was his by inheritance. How that girl he had never seen except with her head down, slinking along, the handmaiden of the Dunbaughs, handed between father and son . . . even making father fight son . . . it was beyond him. Under the moonlight how innocent she had seemed, almost unreal. Maybe the moon restored virginity. He shut his eyes; saw them with their arms about each other, fondling . . . he would go home tomorrow. He would leave before day. They would wonder where he had gone. Jeff would know and feel sorry. Then he knew from deep inside him they wouldn't care, wouldn't even miss him. He sank into self-pity as into a warm bath. But the gnaw of his thwarted wants and envy wouldn't let him enjoy his self-pity . . . churned up now with disgust at what he had been about to allow Jeff to do. No man, not even a friend, can give you a woman. A man. Oh, he had called himself a man. . . .

The trees were thinning into the Rutter yard. The smokehouse loomed before him and beyond he saw a dim light in the house. He rather sensed than heard some commotion there, which picked up his steps so that he heard the groans well before he was on the porch. It was there, just where the porch entered the dog run, that he smelled it, only a whiff, acrid and pungent, of whatever it was he had smelt before. Then it came to him, in that instant of passage to the door lintel, his mother on a hot summer day boiling tobacco to poison her roses. But there was no time to make an intelligent connection between that and this, and the retching now as well as the groaning, for at the doorjamb he was stopped by the sight

of Jack, one foot propped on a chair, leaning over a slop jar, with Ada by his side, as motionless as a piece of furniture, and there was little enough of it in the room, a chair or two, home-wrought but with none of the sturdy rough craftsmanship, the true simple line which the mountains deliver instinctively or out of long timeless revery and love of the knife stroke, the pure thin chip of the adze, the pattern first turned over and over in the mind until it is refined to a perfection which the hand cannot help but imitate. He saw the steaming bowl in her hand. He could not have seen the steam, for the dim lamp threw less light than shadow; but he knew it was steaming as Ada herself, tall in fact, seemed the weird core of all the shadows hovering between floor and ceiling. "Now, Mister Croleigh," she was saying, "take another sup." And Jack, "Aye God, if I do," his voice strained through the rattling of his nausea and the spraying vomit. Lucius hesitated a moment and then stepped over the threshold. Jack's gorged eyes lifted and there was fear.

"What's the matter?"

"Adam's curse. That's all." Jack's voice was low and weak.

"Snake bit," Ada added and nodded to the foot propped on the chair.

Above the ankle they had tied a piece of plow line. The foot looked gray and dirty, and was swollen.

"One of Miss Ada's little pets," Jack said, trying to carry off his old bravado. "But that aint quick enough for her. She's got to hurry me along with this poison she's brewed. Get my jug. If I'm going to die, I don't want to go all gummed up like a tobacco worm."

"Tobaccy tea draws the pison," Ada said. "Drink of it."

Jack waved her away but took the bowl and, grimacing, gulped it down and threw it up.

"I better get a doctor," Lucius said.

"Don't you go away from here. I'll be dead or well, or both, by the time you could come and go."

"The bite's way down, anyhow," Lucius said.

"But not low enough. Bruise the head; bite the heel. Let them that think hell is a metaphor look at me."

Then Jack regarded his nephew with a kind of hurt bafflement, listening too as if waiting for Ada's footsteps to withdraw into the kitchen, where she went to replenish her brew, before he said, "Wouldn't it be a hell of a thing to do all that climbing, in that weather, just to die? When you can do it in bed with all the comforts of home?" And then he closed his eyes, to try as he said the meaning of darkness, lest it surprise him. He kept them shut so long Lucius began to feel uneasy. He said aloud, "You won't die."

After a long while, with his eyes still shut, Jack said, "I thought it was an abyss, but it's got no dimensions. It's nothing."

"How long you reckon hit'll take him?"

Lucius started at the voice and so did Jack. It was little Othel. He had come in with his light stealth and stood near the chair and stared at Jack without recognition of pity, interest, even curiosity.

"Hush," Lucius said.

Othel touched his hand. The fingers were scaly. "I was here first."

Jack was staring now in open suspicion. "What's the matter with you, boy? Aint you ever seen anybody snake bit?"

"I seen'm." Othel did not change expression.

"Well, you've seen another. Now gone away."

Othel swallowed and waited.

"You want a drink, boy. That what you want?" Jack asked uneasily.

"I want your bladder."

"You want my . . . Aye God, boy, you better not try to cut my bladder out."

"I didn't aim to cut it."

"I reckon you thought I'd cut it out and hand it to you." Jack's voice was becoming considerably stronger. "Well, I need my bladder, leastways I did till your mammy turned my belly upside down. I might as well give it to you for any use it's to me."

"I thank you," Othel said and started to leave.

"Hold on there."

Othel turned and looked solemnly at the suffering man.

"What would you do with an extra bladder. You got one now can hold the sea."

"Blow hit up and pop it."

Jack leaped to his feet. "What do you think I am?" he shouted. "A hog? Lucius, I die you let that boy around me with a knife, I'll disinherit you. Hush up. It's no laughing matter."

And then Ada was in the room, with a girl beside her, appearing without haste, as if suddenly transported and the acrid brew steaming in her hand. Jack turned upon her, "He wants my bladder. I guess you'll want my meat. Render me up; hang me in the smoke-house and stuff my chitlins with my own sausage."

"Why hit's worked," Ada said.

There was a full silence and then Jack sharply, "What's worked?"

"The tea's done worked."

Jack looked at himself. He began to feel his leg. Carefully he sat down. "Take that plow line off."

Quickly Lucius cut it loose. "Ouch," Jack said and began rubbing ankle and foot. And then he leaned back and sighed. "I believe I am on the mend."

And then the girl spoke for the first time. "We'll not bed until we kill the snake," and she took Lucius by the hand and they went out to pick up lightwood torches. He found they were talking as if they had known each other always. He noticed the scarf around her head and that she was more of a woman than Ruthy. Her name, she said, was Ada Belle. There was nothing about her that even resembled Ada Rutter. He could not believe that she was her child. She seemed to know all about him, as if she had expected him. She teased him about working at the sawmill, saying she reckoned they didn't give a boy light as him man's work. He found he was protesting he did as heavy work as any, and head work too. He found it was important to him to be believed by her. "Oh, head work," she said and laughed, her voice coarse and intimate so that

he blurted out he was ready, any time, to prove he was a man. Her laugh, sensuous and mocking, made its own reply. With vague unease Lucius could hear his own echoing an intimate and suggestive tone. He had not intended it. It was as if the moment he spoke, something passed from her to him to twist the stress of his words, denying his privacy, or rather as if there was no such thing. He knew they were being too free in their speech, but the release from the tension of Jack's plight seemed to pick them up and carry them along. Hurrying to the house with their lightwood, he knew that this too great freedom would overbear decorum and reserve, those safeguards to all discourse, public and private; and yet at the moment it seemed not to matter.

In the house she handed him a poker, and now her laughter was fuller and lower, the mockery clearer, "It's for the man to kill the snake." And he was left standing, looking at the poker, stiff and smutty, no longer than his forearm, while the rich dark smoke rose out of the flaming resin. They propelled him towards the shed room, with Jack protesting, "Give him a hoe. You want to kill him, or a hoe handle anyway, for a shiftless family like this wouldn't have a hoe all in one piece after laying by time."

Feeling her eyes upon his back,

he strode recklessly into the shed room; saw the rough bed, the quilt thrown back, while the yellow light flickered and the wall and ceiling moved and coiled . . . saw a flour barrel standing at the foot of the bed piled high with stove wood and on top, sitting in pine straw, not the snake but a little black hen. Her head was drawn back into her feathers. She watched him out of shiny eyes.

He was at a loss; then he felt the growing quiet; almost he could feel the question forming in Ada Belle's head. "What?" he asked and saw Ada withdrawn just beyond the door frame, set apart by the resinous smoke and the smoke richly leaping, filling the room; or rather seeming to draw towards her for her use in case of need. About her eyes at that instant, in spite of the flickering yellow glow which should have but did not drench them, was the alert set

of caution of a bird at the moment before flight. Or, Lucius thought, as his own eyes began to smart and blur, like the little black hen.

"Step here, Mister Croleigh," Ada Belle called across the trot.

"I'll not do it," Jack shouted back, his voice resonant and fresh from the purging. "I'll compound no felony. The first time you might call it murder by accident. Now it's with malice aforethought. I'll just set right here, thank you, with this slop jar for company, to remind me of the company I keep."

"To the door then."

He considered this. "Why to the door?"

"To show you something."

"Why can't you tell me?"

"A body has to see this."

Grudgingly now but with curiosity aroused. "All right. But no further than the door, and you try to break past me when them rattles sing, I'll mash you."

And he was there, peering cautiously around in the smoke, and then he saw it too. He stepped into the shed. "Aye God, Miss Ada. It aint fast enough for you to let the serpents hatch according to their nature. What that little black hen going to think when she comes off with her brood hissing and squirming, and she clucking and trying to find in the sound of her beak the trick you've played on her?"

"Did you sleep agen the wall, Mister Croleigh?" asked Ada Belle. "Or raise your foot?"

"Whoever spied on his foot when he was asleep?"

She took the poker from Lucius and held it out, just over the foot of the bed. The little black hen struck a quick blow and made the iron thud.

"So that's it," Jack said, coming freely forward. "Not snake bit. Hen bit."

Ada spoke up now, and in her old whine. "She's the old blue hen herself. I forgot I set her in the barrel."

"Well, it don't matter now noways," Jack said and reached quickly into the nest and threw the hen squawking and complaining

in the direction of Ada. The hen sailed into the far corner, and half stooping, arms spread, Jack moved towards her to hem her in. Squawking and complaining, feathers ruffled, she charged and dodged Jack on her way back to the nest. "I'll wring her neck, that's what I'll do. I might have known a rattler would have more honor than to strike a sleeping man. After all the serpent is only the agent of trouble. Theoretically nobody had to pay any attention to him, theoretically that is, but this hen, she's the principle itself." Bending, he grabbed for her, but her claws skimmed his hand, and she ran half flying, half squatting, into the family room and Jack in the wake of her shrill cackles, Ada after Jack waving her smoky lightwood flame. "Don't you wrang that hen's neck and spile them eggs."

"She's spilt me," he called back, "you and her together. I ought wring your neck along with hers, except I might get hung up in it somewhere and choke myself to death, for God knows to kill you, Miss Ada, have to tie your hair to a tree and pull."

Lucius and Ada Belle slipped in behind them, leaning just inside the door laughing, hers light and gay, and his convulsive and silent and the hen clucking and fussing, flying and hopping before Jack's advance, parrying his lumbering plunges, once flying at him as she might after a mink, until he stumbled and the hen gave one long screech and flew out of the room. Jack left on all fours remained in that position, head cocked to the chicken's loud complaints as she flew back on her nest and settled down with low, fussing clucks.

"You can get up now," Lucius said.

He did not move at once. He was looking towards the far corner of the room. Then cautiously he got up and moved around a rocker to get a better view. Now Lucius followed his gaze. There was little Othel crouched down against the angle of the wall in a pre-natal position, head between his knees, hands over his head, all a-tremble.

"What's got into that boy?" Jack asked.

Jack looked from Ada to Ada Belle and back to Othel, who had not moved.

"Git up, Othel," Ada said gently. "It'll not swollit."

Othel's body gave a convulsive shudder, but he kept his hands over his head.

"He think he's a worm?" Jack asked.

"No, sir," Ada replied. Her eyes now, and Lucius had to look twice to believe it, were as mild and vacant as a heifer's. "No, sir, a grain of corn."

"A what?" Jack exploded.

"He's a terrible boy for notions."

Jack looked all about the room in a baffled kind of ire, and then he dropped his voice in wonder and protest, "And I thought all along he was a pine knot." He took them all in in a glance. "I wondered what it was I missed around this yard. There aint a dusting hole in it, nor a rooster to crow you out of bed. Well, Miss Ada, looks like you've solved your grocery problem. Plant him in the spring and shuck him in the fall. You can live mighty cheap that way. And you've done solved my problem, too. No grain of corn, pop corn or mule corn, ever shot a gun. We'll just set that little black hen down by the spring and old Eddie won't be bothered no more, unless he bothers himself and he's plenty able to do that." He walked carefully up and down the room, as if he distrusted even the floor boards. "Aye God, aye God," he whispered, "this can't be. It's a miracle." He prodded Othel with his bare foot, and Othel rolled around in his flesh but otherwise didn't change his posture. "Get up, boy, don't you know a setting hen don't feed except before day?"

Ada's long arms reached about little Othel and picked him up. She carried him to the chair as if she had a baby in her arms; sat and began to rock him, and the boy protruded from her lap as she crooned, "Where'd you come from, where'd you go . . ."

"There's the question now," Jack said after listening to the verse, thinking aloud and yet aware of an audience, "and there's the answer, too, for that matter, or as much of an answer as our mortal constriction can make. The old question gets only a question. And that goes for the gods, too, if we can believe the classic bards who

tell how their Immortalities, perched pretty high but not too high, just out of range of the sharpest eye, between ground and sky, but still within striking distance of the Fates, walk about in peacock plumes and colors like a sundown sky and having all the pleasure with none of the pain and sorrow. They left that to us down here in Plato's cave. That is, to all of us except Miss Ada here, for she's done beat the gods and the Fates, not to mention the womenfolks who for a thousand thousand years been trying to find out how to suck back a man with all his pounds, booted and spurred, back into the primordial dark and slime, where the weather's neither too hot nor too cold, too wet nor dry, just one long growing season.

"Yes, sir, here the miracle's to be met, not above or below, but here on the Peaks of Laurel, here in Miss Ada's lap, and if you don't believe it, let me introduce you to little Othel, the man-fetus in person. Why there's nothing like it, all of us roosting here like a jury in its box, and the old sow eating Zeus, to drop him to eat him again. There's a spiral for you. But by God, poor mortal that I am, I don't aim to wander so high any more and keep such company, having three months' morning sickness in three hours, even if folks in the valley forget to breed and bear and suffer and the world drops back and catches up on its topsoil, with no Nate Rutters to dig it up for the rains to wash away. If you don't believe, you young folks, that you've come bang up against the mystery and the fact . . ."

Lucius looked back as he and Ada Belle were slipping out of the room. He barely paused; saw the words clod in Jack's mouth; but the words followed them tiptoeing away, "Jesus God, you can't learn young folks nothing."

"The tree, the line tree killed Captain Cree."

At the yard's edge Jack listened as if he waited for more.

But how more?

There was Joe's woods boss, Sol Leatherbury, to prove there could be no more, sitting the patient mule, as if he had emptied himself of all the words he would ever speak. In the dewy air of first light

his face turned grainy and slick as polished wood, the eyes hard blank whorls before the amazement his message had brought him to, its meaning sealed until, ripped from his mouth, it told him calculation is not enough.

"When did it happen?"

"Yestiddy. Yestiddy morning. I taken my axe to cut him out. I lifted it and the whistle come wildcatting down the woods."

"And you set out to tell us?"

"Moonrise."

Sol had calculated that too, not rushing off at once but measuring the pace of fed and rested mules against the distance, as he would sight the fall of a tree, knowing daylight was soon enough and time enough for him and Lucius to know. So Sol had eaten; had slept, and at the proper moment had risen and through the bewitching moonshade, unbewitched, took his way, neither pushing the pace nor idling, and now was here, exactly according to calculation. And yet he and the mules, all in a bunch at the yard's edge, seemed transported.

"Light," Jack said. "Ada'll give you bread."

"I brought my bread," he said.

"The mules will want to sip and blow. Go on down to the spring. I'll wake Lucius."

The mules, leaning slightly forward, stepped softly away, melting into the half-dark secret woods with less noise than a shadow and Jack, alert now but not moving yet, felt thankful for that late purging, the bitterness dry upon his mouth but the head clear and empty. *Now. Now he could receive it*, and the words which had dropped not singly as spoken but withheld suspended from tree to tree until the pattern was made, descending, cut to the hollow. . . . *Love's the theme but death the price and the measure.*

He felt the chill and shivered; he turned about as before a presence but it was only Ada blotting the dog run, the shadow of herself turning solid as she walked to the edge of the porch, those monstrous long arms hanging lifeless to her knees, with their man's

hands waiting to reach farther than a man. She asked, "Who's our company?"

"Sol Leatherbury."

"What's he poking in these woods? Aint the widdy's timber wide enough?"

"Joe Cree is dead."

An intake of breath, and then

"Well now."

As an afterthought, "A tree fell on him."

She raised her arm and wiped at the snuff stain on her lips, and then she said, "The prideful man is no stouter than the puny. I've ever knowed it."

"Pride's got nothing to do with it," Jack said sharply. "No man's a match for a tree."

"You named the tree. I never."

"I didn't name it. Sol did."

She folded her hands beneath the apron. "Mister Cree is no man to let a tree fall on him."

"I don't know what you are talking about," Jack said brusquely.

"Men is ornery. The best of them."

"Why don't you hush, Miss Ada?"

"I can hush."

"Well, hush then."

"But whar's the power to hush the trouble Mister Cree's death . . .?"

"It's not your trouble."

"A body never knows. Start it west. Who can say it won't blow south?"

"Maybe it'll skip you this time."

"I hope it." And then, "But this trouble, man made it."

Jack said, "I must wake Lucius," but he made no move to go.

Out of the murky silence, "Don't I know them. Men," Ada said. "Mister Rutter. You think I don't know him?"

"I know you know Nate," Jack said. "For Christ's sake let me think."

She went right on, "He aint fooling with no more cotton. Oh, no. No money in it. Big crop, sorry price. Middling price, sorry crop. Mister Rutter is a-going to grow him some strawberries and wallow in money. I said one thing. Who you aim to git to pick them berries? Oh, he says, the pickers will be in here thick as grasshoppers. Everbody needs money in the spring. Yes, I said, everbody will be in their crop in the spring. Shet your mouth, woman, or I'll shet it for you. He got the crop out, leastways me and the chillrun got it out and he hared him some cotton choppers to chop hit. They chopped it. They chopped it to a wilt. You know one plant, and you don't know another. The berry roots uses close to the top of the ground. We had enough for preserves. I find them tasty, but a mite light for field work."

he must wake Lucius

Why didn't he go and do what he had to do? Wake the boy and get it over with. Why did he linger in this hiatus between the act and the report of the act, the pretense that it isn't so, the out-of-timeness into which the coward heart withdraws only to hear its beat thumping time along? He looked about and saw they were caught in that suspension between light and dark when growing things usurp the world and men are shadows: tree trunks, limbs and branches, the frail twig, the leaf even, stood forth in velvet pulsation, each part separate and, filling the space between, patches of sky, flimsy colors cut out of paper, showing light but giving none. In this blur of privacy he and Ada watched each other.

"Menfolks," she resumed and he had the sense that she had never stopped. "Oh, they can figure. Plowing a little ground, dropping a few seed, and they done growed them a crop. All by theyself. The seasons never had a thing to do with it. But you let a crop fail, and somewhars the woman ruint it. Smut in the wheat. Weevil in the boll. Woman put it thar. They don't say how. They aint figured that yet, but they come in a-grumbling and the victuals aint fit to eat and they look at you and say the sow's done mashed her pigs. The time we cropped your place, I seen a sight of Miss Julie. A good woman and I thought Mister Cree knowed it. I said

—Thar's one of them that knows he's got a good woman. He don't mind a-branging her woods colt up in his pasture."

"God damn, Miss Ada."

"Go tomcatting around somebody bound to hear you yowl."

"Damn it, Miss Ada," and he came towards her so that he wouldn't have to shout, he felt like shouting, but a whisper was better. It made him hold back, for he couldn't beat her and she had no man to beat her and what good would that do. "How do you do it, Miss Ada?" Oh, it was good to strike his neck at her, see her recoil, and feel the power swell his lungs. "Here you are, gone for years, wandering far, how far a snail's slime can show, you and Rutter, where did you hear such gossip?"

She regarded him, the first streak of day gliding over her, and he thought he saw malice streak her features. She continued to look at him, and then, "You Cropoleigh brothers. Smarter than other folks. A-branging up a little sister in man's rough company. No woman to help her. And her growing up thinking she was no different from a boy, until she's lost in the woods with Pete Legrand. He larned her, and your brother Duncan cuts his guts out and out they tumble, all slick and steaming. I reckon you aimed for folks to think he was holding a mess of chitterlings in his arms. And that doctor brother sewing them back in. I've heared he made as purty a stitch as aer woman."

"Nobody saw." Jack whispered, but now not in restraint but to keep it forever whispered.

"You think Doctor Cropoleigh sewed Legrand's clothes on him, too? You think a body can wear a scar, and it looped on his belly as keen as a new moon, and nobody know it?"

"I've got to wake Lucius," he blurted out. And then he shook his finger not at but towards her. "You wait here. I've got to talk to you."

"I'll wait," she said. He tried to walk carefully away. He must not let her see how far off his bearings she had knocked him. How could anybody know? Nobody saw, and surely Pete . . . He felt her gaze spot him in the center of his back; he passed the corner of

the house with relief. Even now his mind was a blank, as his methodical footsteps carried him over the threshold into the lean-to. He tippytoed into the sappy air still warm and pungent from yesterday's sun, a private air stored between the fresh-ripped boards, the very air of sleep and dreaming, enveloping Lucius, his hands folded lightly upon his chest in that timeless cast of rest, immersed as in some invisible but solid fragrancy compounded of the pine straw's scent, the sun-cured sweat sopped up by the clothes and the faint odor of crushed herbs and the body not his body, *the blinding instant of oneness lingering faintly in this residue of love and youth.*

This youth. What a sorrow comes when you are too well loved.

The dim morning grew at the window hole. The beloved face swam up as clean as a fresh laid egg, the lips slightly parted upon breath, the nose curving still in shadow, his hair as ruffled as parsley. Shapeless upon the pallet beside him, Jeff burrowed towards his companion.

God, is there only one image of fatality? Put Pete Legrand in the place of this boy Jeff; put Julia in her son's place. Find nineteen lost years and stand Beverly and Duncan and Dickie beside him and it would be the same. No, Duncan was halted by the dead fire. It would be the same, as long as the eyelids stay shut. Out of all the combinations possible is fatality so dull as to find one posture, one only, that self-begetting, self-perpetuating wholeness before division, division which is knowledge, the bitter first fruit whose after-taste set us slobbering, wanderers in this world?

Lucius stirred beneath his down-sight, and Jack withdrew towards the window hole. Not yet.

no

Lucius's eyes must not open yet, lest they break the image which, closed, they recalled, the look of his mother as a girl, younger even than he, her eyes of a blue so clear and limpid they seemed sliced by light. In the eyelight is all the difference. Bone, blood, texture of skin, the hair sandy like the Croleighs or black for any Cree. Or it might be the foot which turns to twist the shoe, or the extra toe the doctor snips as he snips the cord—this is a family, the

common inheritance. But the light of the eye, that is the mystery of creation; that is personal, and Julia's sliced by light.

Did Beverly think

Did Duncan

Did he himself

What made Duncan think they could dress their sister like a boy, treat her as one, and make her one of themselves? Dissolve the sex in the common blood? What kind of magic was that, the charm that charms the charmer until altogether and all at once in the circle they made about the pair in the cedar glade, Pete Legrand and their sister-brother, lying asleep upon the cedar boughs, and the brothers with their heads down as before an open grave, as silent as the grave, their necks bent so long a time upon the old division they, at least Duncan, had tried to deny, they who had believed in their own wholeness, reborn into this wholeness out of the blinding noise and the light, the terrible fusing light of their father's and mother's ascension . . .

Yes, Ada was right. A little girl growing up with brothers, no matter how much they loved her, was no proper way to raise a girl. . . .

those pointed ears,

through the window hole the pointed ears of the mule and then its head lunging out of the undergrowth. That long black nose so slick and narrow, nodding into the open. How it brought one time on top of another! And old Leatherbury slumped upon the sharp back, ignorant of time, moved into the yard like an Indian upon his litter. Softly the small tough hooves came towards him.

He went abruptly to the bed and shook Lucius. "Get up. Get up," he whispered. "Come outside."

He waited until the gray eyes focused. Gently now, "Get up. Don't go back to sleep. I have . . . well, news for you."

He stepped outside. It was full daylight now. He looked to the east. In the tree tops the sun blazed steadily like kindling wood. Any moment now it would swing free into the upper reaches of the sky, and burn.

The Water Witch

The Trace.

The toll gate was barely ten minutes behind them.

Lucius held the reins. Jack sat beside him in the buggy, and the buggy sped over the hard turnpike. From beneath the hooves the dust spurted but the sound of the high-trotting iron shoes was muted, so deep had the dust piled itself in the roadbed, a wan red where the gravel was thin; where the limestone had been spread, it puffed and rolled, the color of powdered skin. It blanketed the horse. The buggy could not outdrive it; the wheels ran through it as through a dry water. Hovering above, it became a private atmosphere they traveled in but never through. Jack licked his stiff lips. "Slow down," he said. "You kill this mare, the sun'll kill us walking."

The boy's face, pale and remote, held itself poised in the aura of his grief. He gave no answer but leaned forward, as if to let out a little farther the animal's speed. Jack spoke sharply, "Slow down. The dead will wait."

Lucius recoiled and gave his uncle a quick injured look, but he pulled in the reins. The horse settled into a steady trot, which in moderate weather it could hold all day; but the sky above closed down like an oven. "May be the dead won't wait," Jack said, glancing covertly from under his hat. "But the quick deserve some consideration. You keep this gait, if the horse can."

Lucius kept his trancelike state, and under his hat the hair light as tow; but where it showed, it lay flat and dark from sweat. Julia's one child, the first and last and fair—the Crees dark-skinned, dark-haired, Joe Cree raven black. Could so dark a father get so fair a

son? And then it came to him out of this burning weather of no season, how it had arranged itself, Fate's tableau, scarcely a month ago, the three of them down by the front gate, Joe Cree, Lucius, and Pete Legrand, the irreducible number until he wandered up to borrow a middlebuster. Lucius had no hat on and under the sun the boy's head and fair skin and gray eyes gave him the look of something husked by lye water; and Joe with one hand on the gatepost, regarding Pete Legrand fair enough to burn. Oh, his eye was level and laid like a rule, but it was a bushwhacking eye such as no man turns upon a neighbor. He saw it all now, the clear image of hindsight.

Hindsight, God's little trick to keep us all in our places. Pete erect in his buggy but favoring his middle, flicking the whip at the horsefly buzzing about his nag's collar, saying as how he would be glad to take his teams and work the pike, he knowing how pressed Joe was to cut over the widow's timber before the time ran out and Joe replying, *In this weather? You might as well scrape water as dust.* And Legrand looking away, saying, *He'd heard Corley Puckett, the mail carrier, meant to have the gates thrown open and that would cut down on the profits.* Then Joe—*It was common knowledge that Corley Puckett had piles and the court must know it by now, but anyway the court had better sense than to throw open the gates for an act of God.* Pete flicked his whip and the fly buzzed away, but not far away, and his voice—*My crops are worked over, the teams and hands idle.*

Talk thrown out like a screen of scouts to hide the real business of looking, and each time Joe Cree shifted his eyes from Pete to Lucius his sight hazed over as if it had picked up a lacquer, dry and glistening. Nobody spoke or moved after the clop-clop of Pete Legrand's nag's hooves had quieted in the sand where the creek crosses the road, and the boy's face flat and the sun husking it like lye water . . . and then Joe Cree turned, with no civil word, and walked heavily, shoulders bent slightly as before a high wind, and no wind stirred, nothing but the heat drying the already dry air, towards the house. And then Lucius must have felt the strangeness, not knowing,

for he said, *I'll help you find the middlebuster. And he, himself, I'll get it tomorrow. Come ride home with me.*

Why then? Pete had a husked look too, but so had he always looked. Why that time to see what was there to be seen all along? And then—*Somebody told Joe Cree about that time, on the hunt, Julia and Pete Legrand got lost together.* But who? After so many years, who could have saved it back so long a time? Out of what hurt or meanness?

And why had he been deaf and blind, he, Jack Cropleigh, who knew all things? Why at the one time it might have been some profit to see, and so have stopped it. And why did Lucius have to be caught up at his coming to manhood?

Lucius stared fixedly upon no point ahead. There's a grief now. Youth's sorrow: no past, no future, the one time don't know itself. Or joy, why not joy? It's all the same to a boy, caught up in one blinding whirl of immediacy, the senses short-circuiting themselves. Jack wiped his brow and pulled the hat brim lower.

What would become of history if all men died at twenty?

History, the backward-stepping rocks of a dry stream bed, that tells you where you've been, if you can backtrack yourself. The young can't see; the old looking back to see forward: all bewildered, caught up by feeling or revery. Who's to show the way? Joe Cree, dead in the house, resurrected now in Lucius. Jesus, what a brief mortality. Lucius will weep, sleep, afterwards wake to eat a hearty breakfast: the drought will break, the rains come, the seasons turn, and you're left with history. History, the delayed surprise.

Ahead Jack saw the break in the trees where the old Indian trace crossed the road.

"I was thinking about history," he said aloud. "Yonder lies its path, between that cedar and that scaly bark it looks to be a cow path. Well, it aint, although cows are about all that uses there now. It's the old war trace, and along it your people and mine come through here, trodding the wander weed, and they stopped off at Black Fox

cave and said—Here we are and it's all ours to do with. It twists and turns but it's sweet with shade. I'm not suggesting it, but if you turned off on it, we wouldn't have to bother maybe with sunstroke. It will take longer to go where we're going but it'll bring us out in human shape." He sighed and shifted his weight. The buggy rocked. "Don't mind me. I'm just talking to make sure I can still talk. I don't know at what point the brains cook and free the tongue to babble, making sense and non-sense equal for once."

Lucius made no reply.

The sun by now, late morning as it was, could nowhere be seen. The world was the core of its brilliance, the rings of light consuming the rings of heat, the form of each suffusing interchangeably the essence of each. He could no longer look up or out. He was the bird to stick his head under his wing. He pulled the hatbrim entirely over his brow. The sweat dried as it fell, crowning his forehead with the odor of himself. He never smelled so sweet, or had a sweetness do him so little good. But he had his ease at last. The jolting buggy rocked his flesh more gently since the outward sight was cut off. He felt the heat even abate somewhat. His consciousness spread like a pool, and he rose and sank effortlessly, now upon the gently undulating surface, now downwards where all was a depthless swoon. He gave himself over to the pervading rhythm of this silence. How coming down from the Peaks had tired him! You cannot outclimb it. Like the poor the dead are always with us. They go unnoticed, but all along they await us in the inner chamber. And always it is a surprise. Oh, the importunate presence . . .

The horse was slowing to a walk. He felt the buggy turn sharply, heard the wheel scrape, straighten out, and then roll soundlessly and evenly over a sod so spongy it could only be moss. Had the boy taken him at his word and turned off onto the trace? It was hard to believe. He tried to open his eyes but the lids were heavy. No matter. It would only be to meet the burning sky and again the acrid haze hanging low over the fields, bleached and scorched, ash fired by the acid sun. He didn't know where he was, nor did he care. He knew enough to be thankful for the shade.

He couldn't tell how long he had been suspended in the timeless lull, when he felt his body resist, lean back against a long descending grade. At first it was a slow winding down; then the turns grew shorter and the way steep. He could feel the animal's clumsy jogs and jerks but its footing sure. Only a mule, he thought, could step it so. There was only one such descent on the Wilderness trail. Surely he had not come so far. And yet . . .

the air rose up from below, heavy and aromatic, drawing the heaviness of his flesh and sopping it up into its invisible but ponderable essence. His face tingled as if he'd ridden into a web of dew. The cross scents of flowers, blowing and whirling, drenched his burdened lungs; and, as he spiraled down, the odors condensed into a substance too rich for breath. And yet for all the density his breath took in, his head felt lighter than a gourd. A sudden wind shook the branches; and the sunlight ran over the leaves, and the leaves shook themselves in puddles of brightness, fresh-washed, and the light in the April sky like a clean water. But there was no warmth, only the ghost of winter's sleet to chill the air. Cold drops splashed from leaf to twig. The silence grew immense even as birds and flowers left the woods everywhere unquiet.

Clusters of azalea burst from their varnished leaves; overhung the path to brush the mule's flanks in colored dew. Wild honeysuckle, the dense laurel set the backward-leaning ridges afire. Through the jasmine roving the steep way, gay in blossom, streaks of color flashed, cut out of the depthless air a continuous silence. Did the birds blossom, the flowers sing? His senses were all bewildered until, making a turn, he saw down the high columns of trees the basin's floor towards which the path wound; saw the pale greenish glade, the dark detached groves and the great bowl of water overflowing into the cascades of Lost Creek. He could faintly hear but not yet see the waterfall. Now he knew where he was—he had come to that region of solitudes, the verge of the deep forest his brothers and sister claimed for their own.

But how much longer could they claim it? Each fall they went on the long hunt which became longer, until the hunt turned into

hunts overlapping spring, summer and autumn; and they built a shelter, then another, each begetting its duplicate, each farther from the home place which was too far to come to at last, for rest and curing of the hides and smoking of the hams and salting the meat they had trapped and killed, until they set up house in the Wilderness, on land, claimed by deed and title not theirs but not yet cleared or farmed and on land returned to the state out of tax default, or just abandoned, thin land grown up in scrub pines and blackjacks, but on the rich land thickets of briar and bush made for varmints and the first trees yet standing. Well, they would just have to come back home for a while. There were ten mule colts to alter, long overdue, and only Duncan could do it neat and clean. He could breed them, break them; he couldn't do everything and besides he got lonesome, and besides it was not up to him to look after all the wild life Julia filled the back lots with. Now that Joe Cree was turning back their land, now they would have to come home. . . .

the mule stepped down into the bottom at last, into the long sunny funnel, the only opening in the forest pressing close and down and the green air thick and heady, blanched a little where the sun struck the outer density of the funnel's wall but deep and cool and impenetrable behind.

He got down from the mule's back at the edge of the pool, held the bridle while old Kate sipped, noisily, delicately; then he dropped down and sank his mouth and chin into the icy water. He waited for the ripples to smooth out, upon hands and knees, prone like an animal, feeling the sun lay a spot of light on the back of his neck. It sucked at the pool, too, but nowhere did the water's surface reflect it: which he thought strange as he examined the gelid top, set as lead in a bullet mold, slick in its dull opacity. So, he thought, must the floor of the world have looked on the first day, its patina immaculate in the instancy of creation, that stilled pulsation of the polished film as the instant of time clicked and time began the myriad prick, sprouting.

He lowered his gaze; his eyes sank into marine depths as into a

translucent jelly, the sun's radiance suffusing the water's mass, the water the quiet water distilling out of the fiery penetration light. Above, the heavy green gloom of the mounting forest; below in the pool its counterpart. Which was the object, which the reflection? He could not tell, for his eyes turned loose in their sockets and fell, dissolving, liquefying the radical verdure from center to circumference, throughout, onewhere and everywhere. And now within the stilled monotony of his clairvoyance he saw the high-branched tree growing upwards from the abyss. As it grew it was grown, but nowhere could he make out where the roots fed, nor could he measure where the topmost branches paused in their growth, except the out-reaching arms, exfoliating, forever fell short of the pool's ceiling, that thin incandescent transparency between the outer and the inner parts. And then there was a sudden narrowing: the tree diminished; his vision blurred into a double focus, reflecting the minute branches of a twelve-point buck. But even as he watched, the horns began to sink within the shadowy substance of two smoky blue orbs. As there they drowned, his sight in reverse action rose to their now unblemished surface. He felt a warm squeeze of recognition: Brother Beverly's eyes, lucid, in tireless gaze, smiled up through the murky radiance and seized his own.

"Did you bring the salt?" Beverly's even self-contained voice shocked him, and he rose trembling. Beverly was standing beside the pool, just across from its narrow part. If he'd not known where to look, he would have had trouble making him out behind the bush, so well did his hunter's clothes and the stilled body blend into nature's growth.

"Yes," he replied. "It's on the mule's back. And some black powder. And twenty-five pounds of lead."

As he faced his elder brother, the complaints he had brought fell away, but not from him, rather into the deepest sump of his consciousness, where they sank smaller than the point of a pin but bright as light in a reflecting mirror; and so, like an essence, impinged upon his senses but did not obtrude.

Suddenly he felt his grossness. He had brought with him the

very smell of stock and stall, the ammonia and flies boiling up from the soaked floor of the barn's twilit hall, the care of animals, the burden of directing, foreseeing, which is the strain of management. But in his brother's presence this awareness, even as it tainted him, vanished.

As they drew together, he saw fresh scars on one side of Beverly's face. They had healed but were still raw. The longest had just missed his eye, drooping the lid. He stared at the split features, one part savage as a painted Indian, the other part the brother he loved.

"I was calling up a gobbler," Beverly said.

"No gobbler did that."

"Oh, what a love call. I was the very Helen of hens. And I had a perfect blind. Brush washed up behind a down tree. I could hear the noise the beast made, the twigs snapped and I looked up. It sprang into my gaze."

"A cat?"

"A panther. I could see his surprise, even as he struck. But it was too late."

"You killed the bastard?"

"Let him die with all that shame on him?" He laughed softly. "Lose the witness of my art?"

"Look, Beverly," he said quickly. "Why don't you come home?"

"The two of us hunting our meat, and we found each other. The beast slunk away, self-betrayed because he was beast. I came away with knowledge."

"And almost short an eye."

"Almost," Beverly said. "It's all there. What's a little scratch when you know you are king?"

He felt he must speak out, or he would give in to his brother. He said, "Joe Cree is turning back our land."

"At last."

"Somebody's got to look after it."

"Let Joe Cree keep it. Our cousin loves to lie awake and worry how those who sweat will get their meat. As for me, I sleep before dark and rise before light, and my meat is always at hand. Is it

collops of deer? Quail? Woodchuck? Snipe? The saucy squirrel? It offers itself. I take what I need. Am I naked? The summer doe gives me her hide." All the while Beverly was drawing nearer, until close up he said, "Stay with me, Jack. Duncan and Julia are off on their trails." His good eye plead their old intimacy; but then there came a shift and the other eye, drawn and reflectionless, presented its glazed stare. He shook his head, but slowly.

"Sometimes I still need you."

He said, "But it's our property. Not Joe Cree's. And you are eldest."

"I know a place," Beverly said.

Resisting, he—"It takes money to keep Dickie in medical school. There are taxes. The people must be fed. And Julia. She is thirteen now. Aunt Emm and Joe insist upon her dues, and they are right . . ."

Beverly looked across the pool, towards the waterfall, and the mist from its base seemed to overcloud his sight. "They don't have to insist. A woman will housebreak anything. The woods even. She's got pens of quail, pens of turkey; pet coons, foxes, bred and cross-bred. She's even got a pen of catamounts. Everything but snakes. She's put in corn on the commons."

"The commons? Where?"

"The big meadow."

"That's no commons. That belongs to that man, Peter Legrand."

Beverly did not hear. "And all around," he said, "there are nuts and mast and worms and buds. And she pens them up and feeds them."

"You can't tell me she's got Duncan plowing."

"A few of the hands have run to her."

"So that's where they went. Joe Cree's been advertising for them."

Beverly smiled and the smile deepened the space between them. "Run from work, you don't run to a woman."

"Of course she is. I don't think of our baby sister so." And then, "What will happen to Duncan?"

"It's already happened. He's her jailor. That's what she's done to the best shot in the family."

"I was thinking of love," he said softly, but he saw his brother did not hear. He raised his voice. "Our house needs a head. That means you."

Beverly still didn't hear, and he knew he was in the presence of a life such as dreams embody. As in a dream, behind the compulsive belief in its action, its precarious logic of incorporeal images shifting suddenly but plausibly upon a timeless screen, he followed Beverly into the deep forest, he upon the mule's back, the first-born walking. The mule was forced to its fastest amble, but his brother kept always the same distance ahead, his pace less a pace than a glide, the glide a flow of silence, so that the trailing mule seemed to sense it and put her quiet hooves more quietly down.

At last the flow of their journey, keeping always the same distance, wrapped always in the same stillness, undeviating in its regularity of motion, suspended any sense of motion. In this suspension they achieved a singular gravity, enchanted and haunted, so that it seemed to be the forest, not the brothers, which passed, and in passing presented its inmost recesses, the secret abodes of its inhabitants, and he and Beverly with all the privacy of invisible observers, seeing. Gradually this suspension further clarified its meaning, and the meaning passed between them in a cohesion of understanding that needed no speech. They made two halves of a harmonious whole, the more poignant as he recognized in its perfection a disunity already begun, the chilled stasis of a spasm which will finally sever. His understanding had now surpassed the actual: he was at the mercy of the spiritual bewilderment of the trace, that circle of terror, rigidity preceding revelation.

The trace passing nowhere straight or plain, always sinuous, opening the hidden way while boughs immovably and surreptitiously interlacing, like the petals of a night flower, shut them in from behind. They were trapped but free, as everywhere Beverly untangled the tortuous maze. He went ahead now like a still hunter, his feet shadowing the ground, turning no leaf, breaking no twig,

his spectral cheek gauging a spectral wind. He moved at rapid pace, his dog behind in the old-fashioned way, to be slipped only when the game is wounded. Man and animal avoided the tangled brush, altering no pace to study the ground, knowing where the deer fed and bedded, always seeing before being seen. And never heard.

It was not until later, until nightfall when they made camp, if the damp and oppressive green light presaged anything so timely as night, that he, so to speak, caught his breath and in that moment of suspension could withdraw and consider what they had done. He was obliged to conclude they had done nothing. They had undergone all the stratagems of hunting but no game fell to their hand. What had engaged them was sight. They had seen everything the Wilderness had to reveal: the deer in the red pass into the blue; seen the buck gaunt as if from the strain of carrying the velvet load; and then the horns sharp and polished, the ground pawed, the haunches fat for rutting. Season melted into season, and each showed its weather. And the weather becoming substance in all that grew in the wilderness, in all that dwelt there. There was the season for treading, another for nesting, another for hovering the young. There was a season for dying. And each came around in its order, and nowhere did the weathers mix. He sensed an urgency in this, but the meaning remained evasive, while about this evasion hovered an expectancy of something which could not be avoided.

This induced in him a melancholy heavy with a sense of loss. It was all the more oppressive for his feeling that it was a loss he could never recover. Out of the finality of this, its effect upon him, what Beverly had shown was beginning to make its full impact. As they sat facing each other in the obscure light, he could no longer see the scars on his brother's cheek. His features were whole again with the calm and peace of withdrawal, but a withdrawal into a communion with all things quick and dead. As if to impart this and share it with his brother, Beverly reached to his neck, where around it long thin strips of jerky, running flat to his chest and over the shoulders, made a necklace the color of his clothes, it almost

seemed his flesh, for the hide he wore fitted his body like an outer skin, as beneath it his muscles, with the slightest ripple, moved in a graft of himself to his animal apparel, himself but transfigured. Ceremonially Beverly took two strips of the dried meat, gave one, kept one.

But even as he ate the sweet-smoked jerky, he knew the ritual for him would fail, as it would fail the first-born. He could not accept it, nor its revelation: participation in withdrawal. The meaning at last was clear; his melancholy and sense of loss were now one. Beverly had chosen a fool's paradise. The Wilderness had already vanished. There were patches here and there, some delusively big. Already the new man Peter Legrand had gone to fetch his hands to plow up the big meadow. Legrand would spread out; he was such a man as multiplied.

"But there's Parcher's Cove," Beverly said.

"It's a long way away," he answered. "Shut in by mountains. Only reached from the river."

That smile of the lips, remote, hard, secret, Beverly presented as he shook oh, so slowly, his head. "I go in and out as in my private park. It is close by. Come with me there. The deer have shown me the way in. It is their sanctuary."

"But even there," and he felt himself swaying, as if he were all air, to be sucked into his brother's will, "even there it will be farmed."

"Not while I am keeper," the voice whispered.

"In time it will be."

"But not my time," Beverly said as one done with speech.

And then he knew that nothing he had heard moved tongue or lip.

"The ear," he thought, "has a metaphysics all its own."

He had now reached a climate he could not interpret. The air made a faint tremor foretelling some distant violence. And then he heard it, as both brothers arose to stand in that dark pulsation which delivers the dawn; heard the distant hum close by. It was like the faint murmur of insects; but soon, from some far distant

ridgetop it drifted clearer; he was almost sure of it when it lost itself. His body rigid, straining towards the invisible distance, he heard the silence contract in the morning chill, open into a far expanse. Then it was there, unmistakable now, hounds giving tongue in the chase. The cry was full. By its frenzy he knew the scent to be fresh.

But it didn't begin until he smelled it, what brought the cry to the teeth, slobbered the teeth in the cry, the sweet musky promise, the sweet irresistible promising plunge of bone into parting flesh, the scent drowned there in the rich salty turgid flow. It began then, the shaking. His will drew fine as a thread, his body a pile of dust. Somewhere outside he could hear his heart beating. "Be still," his brother whispered. "It can see the bat of an eye." Beverly touched him then and from his armpit spread afresh the ravaging scent, immersing them both in the identity-in-essence of the separate-in-form. Like a precious water it restored to him his body. He grew still and waited, but like the tyro he was fixed by the cry, forgetting the quarry may be far out in front. There came a rush of crackling brush, a bounding grace, and the stag was out of the covert, his scut erect, horns thrown back on his shoulders, every branch and tine backward-pointing. With a bound it was in the pool and swimming. The instant it touched water he saw where he was. He had made the circle that had brought him back to the beginning. But what he saw could not be in any season. The stag was in the blue and fat: the antlers thick in velvet.

Its hips rose and fell in the water. Its twelve velvet points rocked like the crown of a sapling submerged. At the waterfall it rose towards the persistent roar; then disappeared beneath the furious foam. Close behind, almost upon it, its nose out of the water at a point, Beverly's silent hound parted the foam. Then it, too, disappeared. He had heard no shot; seen no dog slipped . . . he turned in question to his brother. He turned slowly the whole round of the glade. His eyes met only its emptiness. The trees stood motionless. The pool was empty and unscarred. Only the roar of the waterfall smiting the stone, spattering the mist which rose from its

base, only this did he see. Suddenly he knew what it was to be alone and apart in the Wilderness. He opened his lips for comfort, to say he must go to Duncan and Julia, if he could find the way through these trees

but he heard a voice, not his voice, twist his tongue

God, Adam was tricked by sleep. He had no want, to lose the rich horn out of his side.

The Garment.

He was in the dining room at home.

A fire was blazing in the chimney. It was a festive blaze, dry logs mixed with green. They never used the dining room any more, except for special affairs such as the fall hunt. He expected the hunters: yet he knew they had nothing to do with his feeling of expectancy. To perplex him further, he had a sharp if blurred feeling that it ought to be April, not November; that an instant before he had been lost and was trying to find his way out of some strange wood to Duncan and Julia. Or was it Beverly who was lost? He found himself straining to remember, but all he brought up was a feeling that something had happened; or that he was waiting for it to happen, not knowing what it could be, only the feeling enlarged out of the swollen condensation of an awaited but delayed parturition. Exactly like butter that won't come. In this in-between state he felt himself helplessly poised. But the equilibrium, he knew, would not keep. The becoming becomes. Drop a copper in the churn and, bewitched though it be, it will come.

He became aware that his brother Dickie was in the room and that he, too, was waiting. He did not see him; he felt his presence. He had only to turn to see him, but he had no will to do it. Then he heard it, scarcely a word, a sibilance rather—*Forbidden*. It was like thought hearing, or hearing thought thinking, with no sense to intervene or delay. Or like the pop of burning gas out of the end of a log. He leaned close into the fire, listening. He drew very

close, almost into the mouth of the chimney. The flames cast no heat, but he felt no surprise, for the fire grew still as if to give him back the shape of his gaze

which held in its frame the familiar room beyond the flames, Aunt Emm's sitting room, and she upright in her easy chair, smelling of camphor and knitting. She had on the widow's cap she always wore. At times the tuft of lace fell upon her forehead like a bridal veil snipped away. The features were filled out, as though she had forgotten time in some close absorption; but he could see lines and shadows under the chalk she wore. She glanced downwards, and the needles clicked and purred.

Dickie sat beside her. Joe Cree walked up and down. *He* was there, too. This did not seem strange, although he watched from the other side of the flames.

"What are you making, Aunt Emm?" Dickie asked politely.

"A shroud," she said.

"But whose?" Dickie spread his fingers on his knees, carefully lest the cloth bruise them.

Startled, Joe Cree looked at his mother and then resumed his pacing. In shining linen, his coat buttoned at the bottom, he moved with a slow impatience, the well-blacked boots lightly falling upon the carpet. Dickie regarded him gravely, and *he* Dickie. There was nothing in Dickie's handsome and placid features that would show the quick and studious mind he had, or his skill in medicine. There was a reticence about him, profound and absolute.

"A woman won't like it, Dickie," *he* said. "It will seem diffidence."

Dickie turned to him and smiled. "I am twenty-three now."

This was the brother he knew the least and had helped the most, but how unlike Beverly and Duncan for whom they were waiting and who would not come to this house again.

"This room seems all doors," *he* said.

"They save me steps," Aunt Emm replied. She did not look up from her knitting.

"But four? Do you need so many for this little old room?"

"I take so many steps, hunting the servants," she said.

Joe paused and lifted his head. "Mama has put in enough doors for a courthouse. I tell her a high wind, they'll fly open and the house cave in."

"I can lock, or unlock them." She was counting her stitches. "I always carry my keys."

Joe glanced towards the hall door. With the air of having waited long enough, he said, "I have turned back your lands. You have the accounts. As you see, I did not do too badly," and then frowned, to reprimand the two brothers present for the two brothers absent. There was no way to explain their discourtesy . . . Beverly withdrawn into Parcher's Cove, never to come out again, giving him, Jack, his share of the estate as a thing of no value, in exchange for powder and lead and salt—the first-born refusing the inheritance. How could he make Joe Cree understand, whose life was the care and the increase and the just government of his inheritance? He regarded Joe, head modestly inclined, listening to Dickie give him thanks, too extravagantly he thought, and felt a renewed respect and affection for Joe Cree, who stood as that strength, that high tower, from which the cross-purposes, the confusions of life were always brought to hand. That incisive but unharsh voice gave directions so clear and so undoubting that any tangle untangled itself. Or seemed to, for is it not so that any judgment is a snip of the shears: to give is surely to take away. And he saw, looking now at Joe, who was frowning before a discourtesy he had no measure for, that Joe always thought when he cut the knot he was untangling the skein. If he never showed doubt, it was because he had none. This gave belief to others, and so there was order in affairs, if no solution or justice. And it came to him, waiting in that room for something to happen, that if Joe Cree ever doubted, he was damned.

"I had hoped," Joe was saying, "that Beverly would come to his senses."

"The Croleighs have always been cross-grained," Aunt Emm said. "Some more. Some less."

"But to give away property. Go live with that old half-breed, Parch Corn. He must be touched in the head."

"He takes after Archibald, the Immigrant," his mother said. "I've heard pa tell how the old man settled as far from people as he could get, not that such was hard to do in those days. Most people, though, settled as close together as they could. The smell of strange sweat was disagreeable to him, he said. The skin is an outdoor kidney, was another saying of his. He never slept in the house. There might have been method in this, for the Indians scalped his wife and children one night. It didn't seem to bother him. He married again right away."

"But he married again, mama. While Beverly . . . if he's not touched, he's a fool. Deny your family, you stand alone. Who can do this? Who but a crazy man or a fool would risk just himself against the world? Even with superior gifts. A family, even the poorest, is a support for all kinds of frailties and shortcomings. When you go abroad, you carry with you the feeling of something larger than you within you. This is a responsibility. It's why I say he's a fool, any man is, to try to stand alone."

He felt he must speak up. *He* said, but softly, "He's just counted himself out, cousin."

"And Duncan"—Joe showed no sign he had heard him—"he didn't come to fetch Julia. He pretends he can't do without her. Of course, he's scarcely a man yet."

"He's lining up the hunt with Peter Legrand," *he* said.

"The Virginian?"

"Yes. He plows the big meadow in the spring. It will be our last hunt there."

"A fine property. An energetic forward-looking man," Joe said. "I could have bought that meadow at one time, but I didn't have the plows to break it. . . . Yes, a gifted man to do it."

Duncan. What would Joe Cree say if he told him Duncan could not bear to fetch her home? To see her in another house—in any house—was to know in all its bitterness her absence. Always Duncan made the pretense that it was he who was away, gone on a

hunt; and always when her visit in town was over, he would come back, and she would be there as if she had never left. It was a deliberate game of self-delusion he played. *He* said aloud, "Why do the Croleighs always need explaining? Being orphans, can we never quite be grown, never having quite been children?"

"Thank goodness," Aunt Emm said, "you and Dickie show a little of my blood."

"Yes, Jack," Joe added. "You've been a father to the rest."

Slowly *he* shook his head. "Can a brother be a father, when he can't even be a brother?"

Joe Cree showed now his impatience. "I have something to ask you both," he said with easy formality. His voice put a distance between them. "I would like to ask you for Julia's hand."

In the silence swamping the room they heard Aunt Emm catch her breath.

"Yes, mother?" Joe inclined his head, slightly.

She looked quickly at her son and away. "Nothing. I've just dropped a stitch." Her hands left the needles. She seemed suddenly old.

And then they were all rising, waveringly, leaving the room by separate doors. But beyond his door he could not see. It was at that moment he knew it had all happened before. It was like turning back to a page read too fast to get to the end, turning back in the sad surprise to learn there is no end without antecedents. And these you must follow, careful step by step, else the end is a meaningless period. As their shadows withdrew, he leaned forward to see upon what his own door gave; but met the wavering flames instead, brightening the dining room this November night. And the heat from the fire. He felt it now and drew back. Dickie, his blacked boots spread before him, the neglected toddy in his hand, said, "Will you tell Duncan, or shall I?"

The fire spat and hissed in the dining room.

"But is it love?" he asked.

"You mean Joe needs an heir?"

"That too. But I was thinking it's his way to give Julia what he calls a proper life. We could hardly refuse him."

"Why should we?"

"I was thinking of Duncan."

"It's time to think of Julia."

"Duncan and Julia then."

Dickie took a sip from his tumbler. "Joe is a man of substance. But it's not that. We could hardly find a better match for our sister."

"Ah," he said. "Who can tell that?" He reached for the decanter and poured the liquid into a silver cup. It poured like air. "Once children were spending the day here, boys Duncan's age. Julia toddled after in their play. It was hard for her to keep up, but Duncan was always there. To pick her up, help her over places too big, and he scarcely paused in the game, as if she were merely a handicap easy to handle. Once she fell over the horse block and yelled. Never did you see a big brother so tender. He ran and kissed her, brushed her off. In disgust his playmates had to stop the game, and Jesse Bascom jeered—Duncan kissed his sis-is-ter. . . . Oh, that was the lowest act. The boys were of that age. —Yes, I did, Duncan replied, beginning to feel it, the change of attitude. —Would you kiss her anywhere? Jesse asked. Backing a little into the air as into a wall, but holding his ground, his playmates waiting, Duncan said defiantly but feeling his outcast state—Yes, I would. He knew, they all knew the next question. I think obscenity is never so surely defined as upon the mouth of a child. It is the ignorant truth of our fallen state, and yet at the same time the word unfleshed.—Would you kiss her ass? Oh, they spat him there; they hung him to the tree. He turned his head a little, at bay, but his love was whole and innocent. It was the total presence he loved. He shouted back—Yes, I would. . . ."

"But Duncan is a man now," Dickie said quietly.

"Not quite eighteen."

"A man. Brother Jack, you make too much of us as orphans. Who isn't? You orphan yourself to marry. Or when you leave home. What does it matter, if it came to us a little early, this need to make our lives our own way? We would have been all right

but for Beverly. He thought we could go on playing forever, and what is he?"

"Ah," he said.

"An eccentric. Irresponsible. I like hunting too, but I had sense to train for a profession, with your help of course," and Dickie smiled his smile. "No, Duncan must be told. Julia's marriage will make a man of him."

"Does the abandoned hive give up honey? Is there any bee bread there?"

"Bees swarm. That's nature."

"I'm thinking of love."

"So am I."

". . . and innocence. Of what a jealous godhead could not stand, love and innocence. The timeless estate. Immortality without its burden. Else why multiply sorrow like the sands of the sea. Was not that the promise—multiplication, the long division going forward making time? For must you not divide before you multiply? Brother and sister you can neither divide nor multiply."

"Speak to the point," Dickie said wryly. "You know full well there are other needs."

"The body's needs."

"That's oversimple. But deny them and you get sickness. The caduceus is two snakes coupling."

"There now. Enter the serpent. Enter mortality. Go love and innocence your separate ways."

"The matter is simply Julia's marriage."

As if her name evoked his presence, the kitchen door flung open and Duncan was there, framed in the half-dark corner back of the fireplace. He shouted, "A lamp here," and Isham came running, took a spill from the toothbrush jar next the clock and lighted the big lamp, hanging low to the table.

"I wish you'd come that quick when I call," he said.

"Yessir, but I sees you all the time," Isham replied and looked to Duncan. They all looked at Duncan. Dickie slowly drew his legs back and sat up. He had not seen their youngest brother in

two years. He was unprepared for the tall slim youth who watched impatiently the flame grow out of its wick. The impatience was all in the slight angle of the head. The long body merely waited, neither erect nor stooped, but lifting out of itself with the supple restraint of a single muscle. Duncan seemed unconscious of having a body at all. It waited in his presence like a shadow at noon. His clothes were old and rusty and stiff with sweat and dew. As the light enveloped him, its milky glow brightened, as if it met a vitality, unspent and virginal, which the hidden flesh exuded. This gave him an added dimension. It could almost be seen, the more since the odor he gave off seemed its odor, rich and clean, the dry damp of the woods, thickened and modified, slowly drawn by the fire to usurp the domestic air of the room. Upon his face, as he watched the lamp, was the total concentration of an animal. The instant the wick grew full he made a soundless movement forward and raised a garment to the light. It was a hunting suit of perfectly cured skins sewed with gut. He regarded it with the surprise of a child who for the first time notices an object apart from himself. His lips worked but he spoke through his eyes.

"The skins. Twin summer does."

Dickie got up and extended his hand. "Won't you greet your brother?"

"For Julia." Duncan confronted his two brothers with a glance, demanding and withdrawn.

Dickie, piqued, dropped his hand. Duncan had given no sign of recognition. The image of Julia blocked his sight. He dressed the garment with his eyes.

"The traveling cloud," *he* said across the table to Dickie. "The burning bush. A limit and direction to the limitless, directionless, the Wilderness in its arid expanse overrolling the horizon, every way. Or that other, the thick wood crowding sight back upon itself."

"Look at yourself," Dickie said to Duncan. "In the house like this. You're rude and rough as one of Brother Jack's jackasses."

And then he knew he must talk, to stop what could not be

stopped. He said, "Jacks are much misunderstood. A jack may look rough and it be long as your arm, but appearances are deceiving. No maid is shyer. Does he come at it snorting like a stallion, or roaring like a bear? Or crow like the cock, the self-deceiver? He does not. He's as dubious before the brute act as if he knew what man and beast had done to love. They've made it too common, that's what. You've seen a slow jack, looking to the right and then to the left, his long ears swinging and his eyes ringed like a clown's (although he's the faery prince bearing the folly of the world in his hide) and that scent under his nose as thick as honey on the air, making even the flies giddy, and oh, what a sadness at the mounting.

"And I know what you think. You think what the world thinks. Well, even if you are my brothers, you aint very smart. Let me tell you, though you don't deserve it, Christ, can't you for once take your nose out of your own heart, not to mention lights and livers. Only the jack can find in the odor of blood its metaphysic. That's why he's slow. All jacks. Does that tell you nothing? The one creature out of all creation that's slow at it. I do not mention the sloth, God's one moment of fatigue. You remember that black one, a generation removed from Spain, I paid a thousand dollars for. Oh, how you joked and jeered that I didn't get even a slick dime for my money. And no prince led more carefully to his nuptials. There was no pomp, it's true, but much circumstance, and just at the beautiful moment a rabbit broke from cover and sped between his hind legs. Down he came and it limp as a bouquet the morning after. Scared by a rabbit? Overmodest? These are the plausibilities we fall back on, the overhanging limb we snatch as the flood drags us by. No, it was simply this. He took the only excuse, no matter how frail, to avoid it.

"You know the quality of a man or a beast by its get. Well, what of the get of a jack? Just the mule that does the work of the world, that's all. And so humbly and with such abuse put on him you'd think he was an old Christian. Well, he's older than any Christian. Ask that Queen of Spain who would make no progress

unless it be behind a span of palomino mules. Trust a Spaniard to know what's what. Not barbs with pedigrees running back to the flood. But the mule, the divine beast. Noblesse oblige. That's the mule's humility. The humbler the person, the lower the bow, and the mule bows to mankind. For it is its sire's get, and the jackass was the only creature with compassion enough to follow the emigrant out of the garden gates and take upon himself man's burden. And when those interdicted gates swung to, forever clanging in the common memory, did the jack kick to get back in? He did not. He drew up his neck and brayed. And the Omnipotent Jealousy heard in that bray its folly, for it turned it all to comedy. And not too high at that. Yet all played out in proper diplomatic usage, for the jack undertook the literal burden. With never a complaint. It's mankind that beats its breast and asks Why. There are no Jobs among jacks, for he's got an ace in the hole.

"And what is that?" Dickie asked.

"It's the sterility of his get. When the curse bears down, there's the mule to show the way. Deny the creative act. Stop it: this breeding. Was ever a Divinity so subtly mocked? And so, my brothers, every time the jack looks slowly to the right and yet slowly to the left, it pales their Essences the Principalities and Dominions and the Angelic Hierarchies, for what is an Essence without its dilution? Until the Divinity could stand it no longer. Repented. Took upon Itself what It had put upon mankind. And if you want or need the proof . . . Upon what did the parents of God flee? Upon what did He mount His triumph into Jerusalem? A prancing steed? A humpbacked camel? No. The only back equal to His station. That Royal, that shaggy, that divine, that low-to-the-ground, that ass's back. Ah, what a divine world if all men were jacks."

Dickie looked curiously at his brother. "Is it that bad, brother?"

Duncan, his ears sharpened as if for flight; but diverted, his eyes pools of wonder, averted from the garment hanging now motionless at his side,

and he, lest his plausible tongue, forking the words, slipping, swirling down the ear groove into the eye's pantomime, should stop, took breath to say more. He was not quick enough. Dickie was already speaking. "We have news for you, Dunk. About Julia. Good news."

"She's here then," he breathed.

Dickie paused slightly for emphasis.

"Joe Cree has asked for her hand."

Duncan heard; at least the sounds were made, but sight is sovereign, and Isham had opened the door. "Hyar she," he said.

Julia stood a moment under the lintel, in the fine dress Aunt Emm's Sewing-Mary had made. Isham, the good servant, had anticipated his masters' wants. He had fetched her to stop the talk, for the servant must have his part too, that vicarious enlargement of the human scene, and the wages high in wonder, if not in pity, where the cost is not his cost. So there she was, and there were the brothers. And they saw her, the child dressed like a woman. But it was not that that took their breath, for even as the instant sped the child was lost in the folds of the garment. Her hair was up, and the upright comb seemed too heavy for the slender, ravishingly pathetic neck. It curved and the shadows lay deep at the fragile nape; the small hairs too fine for the comb, in soft disorder, waved upwards out of the faint cleft. She cried, "Bubba," and in a rushing floating dash flung her arms about Duncan. Then she whirled away, leaving him as inert as a piece of wood, her skirts swelling to fall quietly, surreptitiously, about her ankles, as if they followed some preordained pattern, with the toe of one shoe just showing. And not only Duncan, but all the brothers were transfixed, as she waited in the innocent delight at the knowledge of herself, in the sure sense of it, the intuitive acceptance of the effect she was making, her hands crossed at her small waist, palms opened out, half-cupped, awaiting the bouquet. Oh, innocence, the great ambiguity! And virginity its paradox. The picture stepped down from the wall into the eyesight, the membrane in shreds, the eye red before the promise, unknown yet known, untouched, yet touching—the promise compounded by the familial blood.

She frowned. "You don't like my dress."

"We like it too well," Dickie said. "But we like you better." He took her hand and kissed it. Playing the delightful game, she curtsied. "You see, brothers," Dickie said with smooth gallantry, "what a gift we make our cousin."

With a deft twist of the wrist she was free and before Duncan. "Why don't you like my dress?"

He did not answer, and she stamped her foot.

Duncan's body gave a convulsive shudder and he stepped back into himself, and out of himself, as if his flesh had that instant both begotten and expelled itself, leaving him trembling in the shock of one born full-grown into his predicament. He made a movement to push her away but grasped her, head half turned, looking before and behind. She gave a short muffled cry of pain, and Dickie shook his arm. "Turn loose, you fool. You're hurting her."

"Now, now," he said, coming forward to pacify.

Duncan set her aside as if she were some light bundle. "Joe Cree's too close kin. She might as well marry me."

"I'm not deaf," Dickie said and his voice was low and soothing, and then he began to talk in his bedside manner, all fresh and new, one almost expected him to show his diploma, saying both medical science and custom saw nothing wrong in first cousins marrying, particularly when the union promised such domestic good to all. He ended upon a lyrical note of deprivation, now they must give up their little sister they loved so well, but that after all by the union proposed, into the family itself, they were really not losing her. He talked on, and Julia, moved by finding such value in herself, said impetuously to Duncan, "Cousin Joe is going to build me a house on his farm. And a room in it for you, Bubba."

Duncan's voice trembled in sudden despair. "I was going to show you where the turkey hen hides her nest."

"Oh, Bubba," she answered, just aware of his hurt.

He deliberately broke the growing strain of sorrow. "Show her, Duncan, what you made for her."

Duncan did not understand. He repeated himself. Slowly Duncan looked down. The garment of skins lay limp and crumpled

on the floor. He seemed to study it; then eagerly he picked it up and handed it to Julia, but as she reached to take it, his eyes dulled. And then he was gone by the kitchen door. She ran a little way after him but stopped midway of the room, uncertain what now to do.

He gently took the skins and held them under the lamplight. "You can wear it for the hunt tomorrow," he said. "That will make it up."

Dickie kicked the log and the fire popped and sparked.

Duncan stumbled into the moonless night. No wind stirred. The stars were cold bright specks, dripping frost. But the stars streaming from his eyes were not. So hot coming out, so cold up there. And so quick to get there. Out of reach, but sifting the dry frost dust down. In the quiet he could hear it gather at his feet lightly gripping the frozen ruts in the barn lot. How many nights had they been caught out hunting, he and Julia, with a skin below and above, to wake into the glistening iron dawn, their eyelashes rimed over, the fire ash gray, but warm together, the heat of their bodies sealed in by the stiff-biting skins. They could not be felt apart then. It was like sleeping with yourself doubled up, with none of you missing, until the skin opened back, all hard, and the air slid in and you shivered apart, halved but still one. Now they were two, and something between. He stopped all brittle, blinded, Julia swimming before him, the skirts swelling in lighted shade. He widened his eyes, to plunge again into the soot-blue night, to breathe again, and something heavy and weak dragging him back. In mild surprise he understood it was the dead weight of his body. He leaned against the barn door, shivering. *He had never felt his body before.*

The night chill, the frosty air, surrounded him, a thin shell enclosing his turbulent flesh. He heard the thump of his pulse, heavy and sullen, and the blood's breath coil down the spiral of his ear; but the blood flowing silently gathered into his reins, usurped

flesh and bone there. He hit the door with his fists. *Let Dickie give her to Joe Cree. She'll be sorry.* He climbed to the loft and, leaning over the dark cleft of the rack, threw hay down, although the peaceful regular crunch of his mare eating rose upon the pleasant sharp smell of the stall. But the odor of the hay was sweeter and he sank back into it, going down into its prickly comfort. Trust Jack to always get his hay in on time. It was the one time everybody had to bow down to Jack. For a moment he thought how they left this brother so many of the chores and left him alone so long at a stretch. And he felt sorry for him for the first time, for himself too now, who as soon as the mare was done, would ride away deep into the forest where even Beverly had never been

on the edge of the backwater, the trees so high and thick it was like standing among columns, ceiled overhead by branches woven close as a mat. The night he took Julia there he felt small and solemn, and they walked in cautiously as into the place where the secret was. And then from above, so high up he didn't know when it began, or even at first if he was hearing it, the ceiling sighed and groaned; and the groans hung upside down like bats. He felt Julia pressing close and he put his arms about her. He thought she smelled of fear; remembered the vinegar they had drunk to keep the mosquitoes off. She stood up on tiptoe and whispered, "Hear the leaves a-borning." He leaned down to her ear. "It's the limbs rubbing and touching."

He then put his finger upon her lips, for the turkeys might hear. He knew, he hoped they were clutching their roosts. It was high and they were light sleepers, but he was thinking about how they walked about the Wilderness, keeping all the sounds in place; and yet their ears were not so sharp as hers. It might be she had surprised the sap working the bark and greening the bud. It was March, and they were in a place no man had set foot before. He had not told her this, only that they were going where the turkeys might be less shy. She might have been timid about so private a place. They had set themselves to make the turkey give up all his ways. Of all the creatures he guarded best his nature. A rabbit

was smart, but he courted in the open and you could bring him out of a hollow log with a twisting stick. The panther, no matter how long the race, always treed. The deer had runs and feeding grounds and beds well marked as a town full of streets. Wild pigeons came in droves to block out the sun, but when they roosted, you could pick them from the trees like apples. But the turkey, now, they had watched the seasons round, and what they knew was a lot, only you couldn't count on it. You'd go to a roost and they wouldn't be there. Or they would be. He had practiced their calls, and they had come into the round of his rifle pea and died there. Or they would answer the hour long and never show, or hesitate just beyond a safe range. And why was that? Was it the ear or the eye, or did its beak lip danger out of the air? And the hermit gobbler, who never yelped nor answered yelp, lonely as God, whom no man had seen fly from his perch, or hen squat for his treading. The embodied silence of the forest, he moved, wrapping its mystery in his cunning

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but now they would have turkey meat, turkey knowledge maybe. It was the beginning of the mating season, when the gobblers are reckless, their wattles bursting with love, their feathers spread for glory, courting bold. At first the hens are cold. Later at his treading ground the hens would come and keep coming long after he is skin and feathers and would be let alone. But the hen fat on love can't get enough. He thought on this, as he and Julia waited, the dark swimming around them, the night air vibrating with the stretch of day, this waning of the male and waxing of the female. Not too far off a barred owl screeched—the rusty wheel of night was moving away.

He stepped in front of Julia and led her towards her blind. They walked carefully—there was plenty of time—the owls would keep it up alone for a while. He had a little trouble finding her blind; they had reached the place in the worst kind of dark, just before it thins itself. He had learned to fix a thing or place well in mind; then let feel do it. And it never failed. He got her placed and she followed his mute directions, mostly by touch, which way

to turn, where to rest her gun. She was loath for him to leave her and he to go, she so small, a little splash of darker dark in this close cave he had brought her to, for so it seemed, except no cave smelled so rich. She put her arms up and brought down his ear. "The owls just started," she whispered.

and so he stayed. He had never known her to mind taking a stand alone. It wasn't fear. It must be where they were, deep down and away from everything, shut off, with no inlet nor outlet . . . the spongy cold off the ground made his feet ache; he was out of season with his summer moccasins. Carefully he lifted them to stir the blood and the earthmold rolled sluggishly, coming up damp but smelling dry. It came to him then that they were standing on all the days of the world, and this day coming swelled fresh out of the rot of all those others. How strange for him to think such a thought. It rattled him a little. Maybe they shouldn't have come here. Then he felt it, the night leaving his cheek. He'd better go. He touched his sister to let her know and softly threaded his way to his own blind twenty yards behind. That would give her that much closer range, since he would do the calling.

He was none too soon. The wing beats and lonely cries of the ducks lifted off the water beyond the glade. If he and Julia could only stay like this forever, she never go to Aunt Emm's; if that Pete Legrand hadn't come to the great meadow; he was all right, he guessed, but he acted as if Julia was just another girl and she was silly when he was about . . . there was the thrasher in the canebrake . . . he must stop his mind from wandering and think what the turkeys would do, now the small birds were chirping. The day was coming fast. He took out his wing bone and licked it. His hearing was all at the mouth of his ear . . . the trees appeared like ghosts of themselves, black ghosts, a gray squirrel chattered briefly . . . the world sucked in its breath and held it. The silence was absolute. Overhead a stream of gobbles, and in its wake sound rushed back. All things grew solid. In the east off where he could not see it, the sun was up.

He raised the wing bone to his mouth and gave three quick

yelps. There, a gobbler answered. Overhead he could hear the puff and scratch of wings. The fool was trying to strut on his perch.

Above and around now, unseen, he could feel the gliding silence of the turkeys leaving the roost. He waited, he scarcely had to wait, there it was over to the right of Julia, the yelp from the ground and the burst of gobbles. He held just the time and answered. The game was on . . . he was drawing the bird toward the small glade and the pea of Julia's rifle. All things held in the secret light . . . the watery air was spawning. Kneeling he watched through the knothole of a rotten limb which curved before his blind. His eye detached itself to see; it drew the serpentine neck up through the tender shrub. The neck swayed erect, pointed its beak and slowly turned that one bright eye. The eye swelled for an instant, filling his own. He froze, his lungs closed; his sight fused with the liquid glint, sank into the savage pool, the oily glitter of the abyss, depthless, endless: nothing: the all-pervasive waters. At the eye flick the knothole turned empty. Now he plainly saw the beak, the serpent-like head of the turkey turning until the other eye skimmed the stilled terrain; then smoothly gliding, as if the air were its sheath, the neck sank among the budding leaves. He released his breath: the bush shuddered with a spray of gobbles, rich, loud, and close. His tingling lips gave again the soft quick tremor three times. Instantly the invisible bird returned an impatient, imperious reply. Promise of love filled the narrow glade, and then out of the cover at last sailed a rush of feathers gliding sideways. Tail spread, putting, wings snapping as they scraped the ground, head sunk back, wattles gorged red and running purple, the bird began to tread its dance. It turned, it stamped, its wings plowed the loose pliant earth. It faced in all its glory the direction of the teasing sound. Its coarse black beard stiffened upon its breast. In a swooping charge it came with a rush, as the rifle cracked once. For an instant the wattles glowed like the wounds of love; then quietly the bird fell among its collapsing feathers. It kicked a few

times; once it leaped high, as if the ground had burnt it. Its spasms stilled; it looked now only half its size.

But the gobblers still resounded in the glade. Cautiously he leaned over his blind, saw Julia's half-risen form sink down. He understood—another male was on the ground challenging. He gave a quick call as the second bird rushed from cover and bore down upon the stilled form of its rival. Drawing nigh, it changed its posture and began to strut, complaining in impatient demanding liquid tones. It jumped sideways and struck with its feet the lifeless body. Its song was like water splattering a hollow tube of glass. Then the rigid wings enclosed the downed bird and the feet began to tread. Slowly Duncan looked down the pea of his rifle. He fired at the wing joint.

When he reached the spot, Julia was already there. They looked at the two dead males in silence.

"What was he doing?" Julia asked strangely.

"Treading," he said. His voice was low.

"Couldn't he tell?"

"They'll do that," he said.

"And dead," she said.

She looked at her brother soberly.

"Maybe to be down. Maybe that's it," he said at last. "Maybe it's the shape only that counts."

They seemed not to know what to do.

"And all along it was nothing but a call," she mused.

"Breath and a wingbone," he said.

"Bubba." She spoke quickly. "I know. The gobbler hasn't got any sense. The hen comes to no call. We've got to find where she hides her nest. Then we'll know."

As he looked at his sister, her expression eager and excited, he felt it was she, not he, who was now their guide and he felt she had brought them to a boundary he did not know how to run. She was wiping the mosquitoes absent-mindedly off her face. "Let's go," she said briefly. "Pick up the birds."

"I wouldn't care for them now."

She looked at him in surprise. "You're going to leave this meat for varmints?"

He hesitated; then he leaned over to do her bidding. It seemed to him that already an odor of corrupting bodies was tainting the air.

The Chase.

It had been a long day and a good hunt. The trophies, tied by their heels, hung from tree limbs and the heavier saplings. In the violence of their displacement the deer festooned the camp site like offerings. Their branching heads, stilled at last, prodded the haze of night rapidly advancing off the great meadow. The hunters with quiet impatience breathed in the aroma of venison stew, or they idled at the spring, cleaning themselves. Only Duncan stood off from the others, upon the edge of the bare and rolling meadow.

"Wash up, Dunk," Dickie called to him. "They'll be in."

Duncan gave no reply, nor did he withdraw his gaze.

Jack came and stood beside him. He, too, looked where Duncan looked. He said, "A wounded buck will run far, when pressed by horse and dog."

"Something's happened to her," Duncan said.

"You couldn't lose Julia in the woods. You know that. Besides, Legrand is with her."

"That son of a bitch," Duncan said, and then more quietly, "Which way they take off?"

"The Big Hopper waterfall."

The twilight was fast fading. Duncan had night eyes, but at this hour no matter how he strained to see, Jack thought, he must feel his sight disperse. Twilight, the chameleon hour, when a man does well to hold his breath.

Duncan said, "I thought she would follow me."

He tried to hide his despair.

"I don't see why you thought it," Jack said in careful reproof. "You were mean to your sister."

"You saw the way she acted."

"She acted all right."

Duncan spat at the ground. "Like a bitch in heat."

"Hush, now."

A voice called, "Stew's ready."

After a while Jack said, "We'd better eat. They don't come in soon we'll need a little food."

"You eat." Duncan's voice dropped. "She looked naked. The suit was too tight." The words were so low they seemed a thickening of the breath.

"Well, you made it for her."

"She didn't have to wear it."

"She wanted to please you." Jack turned for emphasis.

"Yes. She tries to please everybody. Joe Cree. Legrand . . ."

"Let's go eat," Jack said.

"You eat. I'm not hungry."

They were not looking at each other but into the great meadow, its burnt-over highlands rolling in darkness now deeper than the sky. The streams with the tall swathes of grass too moist to burn ran their courses like rivers on a map. It was hard to believe that these grassy streams had hidden the deer which had made the chase, ending in the campfire, the comforting pipe after meat, and a sleep proper for man. This sleep, he knew, neither he nor his brothers were likely to get this night. The swathes of grass had bounded with another chase which would lead them far, how far he dared not think. A few stars were showing hard and bright. The moon's quarter was late and Julia's eyes were not so good as Duncan's. Perhaps after all she and Legrand had had to make camp . . .

perhaps

Jack turned away in his kind of haste, nothing abrupt, a longer surer stride. He would eat a bite and prepare Dickie. Duncan would not wait much longer. He walked into the pleasant glow of the campfire, flickering the bare branches, holding the frost and

darkness at bay. The bright lift of food's renewal chattered the tongue of one or two, but most of the hunters were quiet. One or two looked speculatively at Jack. Eddie Dunbaugh said, "They aint no worry. Blindfold her, she wouldn't lose." Pete Legrand's two servants were bending over with coffee, the hot dark vapor flaring their nostrils, steaming the open-mouthed cups. He blew into his to cool it.

Dickie idled up. "What do you think?"

"I think we'll ride all night."

"We won't find them that way."

"I know."

"Joe Cree, now," Dickie mused. "He should have come."

"Business before pleasure. That's our cousin," Jack said carefully. "The trouble is he don't always know his business."

Dickie thought a moment. "I suppose if your sawmill burns you have to go."

"And look at the ashes to tell you what you already know, that you've lost money. Meanwhile . . ."

"Yes?"

"Your affianced is alone, in the woods, with your rival. Maybe he don't think he stands to lose there."

"Rival?"

"You're spilling my coffee."

"Legrand was merely trying to divert her. He's a gentleman, and Duncan was cruel, turning her pets loose."

"Maybe he was, and maybe Pete's a gentleman. But gentility's got a daylight look. Did you ever see anybody bow in the dark? Did you ever look for a gentleman at midnight? In what quarter of the night do you find him? For that matter, who ever saw more than the natural man at daybreak?"

Dickie interrupted impatiently, "Surely you're not . . ."

"There goes Duncan now," Jack said, "to saddle up. Be sure to bring your medicine bag."

"You think we may need it?"

"Just bring it."

And yet he knew when earlier they had ridden in for the hunt and saw the desperate look of hope on Duncan's face, hoping the skins would bring her back but knowing better, not even hoping but willing it, for when was hope ever purer than in the certainty of loss. And there she was wearing them, but wearing better the light grace of her seat upon the shell of leather, holding the bridle with a refinement of control, as if it were the horse's mouth that moved her wrists . . . waiting for Duncan to lift her down, his behavior of the evening before forgotten and forgiven. But none of this did Duncan see. He saw the too tight garment shaping too plain the woman in the girl. He whispered in low fury, "It's too small." She watched his features flush with shame. "But, Bubba," she said, her blue eyes dark with hurt. And then Pete Legrand lifted his hat, "Miss Julia, let me show you where I'll raise my dwelling house."

The night had by now everywhere closed down, and the meadow spread itself underfoot. The horses no longer tossed their heads and shied. They understood they had to go, had settled down. Duncan leaned slightly forward in his saddle, guiding the brothers. Horses and men seemed no more than moving shadows, but the hooves made a solid sound, the leather creaked. In all the broad meadow these were the only sounds. Once Jack looked back. From afar he could see the small glow of the campfire, flickering in the immensity of the night. Even as he watched, the fire flicked out.

"This is your fault, Duncan. You know that, now," Dickie said, but the falling hooves muffled the words. Perhaps Duncan heard, but his stubborn posture could be felt, only that, his neck and shoulders reaching forward into the edge of invisibility, as if his will and fatality, at last conjoined, traveled there, outside himself, forever balanced upon an invariable distance whose mathematics he alone could decipher.

"The anonymous dark. The blind touch," Jack said.

Duncan's blind stare as he brought the axe down, breaking the palings, and through the gaps the frightened pets had sped,

flurrying the yard in feathers, parakeets greening the late daylight, turkeys gobbling and trotting, and up whirred the quail, rising upon planes of air; the mother fox in her false den waiting, the bright eyes of the little ones slyly a-glitter behind, beasts and fowl all mixed until the cat sprang into the eye of the peafowl's tail, and Julia leaping from her mount to catch Duncan's arm. He lowered the axe slowly and together they watched wonderingly the woodchuck rise straight up, into the bare limbs. Then Duncan, moving his stiff lips, *What do you want with these now? You think I'll feed them, while Joe Cree tumbles you in his arms?*

"Hadn't we better holla?" Dickie asked.

They rode along.

"You do it," Duncan said.

"They could pass, and we not know it."

"Holla, if you want to."

"Well, stop then."

They drew rein, and into the pure thin brittle November night rose that cry, the high long wail abruptly cut off, urgent, melancholy, that single vestigial call of beast turning human, crying to its kind in the primordial wastes. A horse stamped its foot restlessly. Dickie called again, and listened.

"Well, you aint forgot how," Jack said.

They rode on until they met a wall of thicker dark. Along this Duncan took them until he found an opening among the trees. They entered in single file, Duncan before and Jack behind. He noticed almost at once the difference in the air. Riding athwart the meadow, although there was no wind, he had felt the cold stream through his clothes as through a sieve. He sensed now not a warmth exactly but a closeness; he could feel the bare trees weaving their tangled arms overhead, cutting up the firmament and, if not lessening the chill, fixing it to limbs and twigs in patterns of invisible foliage. His body resumed its constant temperature. He was no longer aware of his inner garment. This would have taken time; yet the change seemed almost instantaneous. This meant they traveled now the dark night wood, where the mind floats out of

season, in its own ichor, oblivious of time and blood. Blood, the streaming filament of time; yet, close in the privacy of its incestuous tube, it knows no time, flowing like a ghost through the two walls, birth and death. But it can harden, too, and blacken. A slit, a rent, a breath of air will do it. This he knew, as well, the mystery and the act.

They must have wandered off the trace, bewildered without knowing it, for three hours' riding should have brought them to the waterfall. Instead it appeared out of the murky haze of first light, a wide dark tongue plunging into the pool's thick smoke. Its roar, for a while, muffled tongue and ear. They sat their mounts upon its edge, man and beast a part of a strange silence. The horses sighed, and he now smelled the horse smell. They were good blown. Duncan's eyes had strayed into his own bewilderment.

"Look," Dickie said wearily. "Cut to pieces."

At the edge of the mist lay Pete Legrand's young dog. Its bowels had been ripped out and trampled. All around it were the hoof marks of the buck. Duncan was down, examining the tracks from the woods to the opening. They were well marked in the moist ground about the pool, even the print of the dew claws showing. A few crumbs of dirt had fallen down the sides into the tracks; a leaf stained with frost—he did not need these signs to tell him they had been made the afternoon before. The dog's body was sign enough. It was the print of the horses' hooves which puzzled them. They, as well as the buck's, came to the edge of the pool and disappeared. Duncan walked the trace where it scarred the steep ravine and then came back. "But where?" he asked at large.

They did not have long to wait for a guide. Before their eyes the mist solidified into the bow of a skiff floating out of the frosty vapor, with Beverly upright, dark from the wet, his hands dragging the long pole. He leaned forward in slow rhythm and gave one long push. The prow made a languid spurt towards the bank. It was the very movement of silence as it came to ground, with scarcely a jar or knock. The water lapped about its bottom, and then the water lay as slick as a pane of slate. Beverly did not greet his

brothers. He waited in the skiff, holding the pole like a staff, and his kin held back before the strangeness of him. They had ever seen him smooth-cheeked. A beard now roughened his face and the moisture gave it a greasy look, but it was his glance which shocked them into silence. It offered no communion whatever; no memory of blood or place, of the small common deeds which fasten brother to brother. Appalled, they regarded him; then the mist whirled down upon his eyes, like a hood. Out of this his voice, rusty and strange, "Hobble the horses, and git in."

Duncan burst out, "But where are they?"

"Git in," he said.

Dickie sat in the boat, hugging himself from the chill. Jack pushed off and jumped into the stern. Duncan, standing behind their ferryman, entirely masked him, so that as Beverly made the long slow swoop with the pole, his body seemed to bend out of Duncan's side, as if Duncan were dividing himself. They glided into the enveloping mist. Shadow and substance, Jack thought, as the rhythm of the stroke brought Beverly back. The two-in-one, he continued, but in this cloudy travel who has substance, where the outward sight is dispersed and returns upon itself? Do they see the end of this, or only the floating haze? Then Duncan gave a spasmodic shudder; he heard the roar of the waterfall growing and knew the coffin-shaped boat was making for it. The mist boiled out of the roar; the roar out of the waterfall, a sheet of liquid rock spilling into the frothy base. The skiff made rapidly towards it. Dickie looked back at Beverly in sudden alarm, then ducked as the skiff shot through.

At first they were aware only of the muffled falling, its steady sound, and that they had gone back into the dark, as they sat in the boat beached upon the dry dirt of the hollow room behind the waterfall. Beverly gave them little time for wonder. He led them to the back of the room which narrowed into a close warm passage. Along its broken and stony bottom he advanced easily, as one long familiar with the way. But his brothers followed haltingly. Jack slapped at the wall to keep from falling. It was cold and slimy. He

quickly withdrew his hand and wiped it on his shirt. Ahead he could see they were moving towards a dim gray eye. It did not blink but seemed to watch them steadily, indifferently, as if already they were threading it. With a small surrender he trusted Beverly to guide him along the passage, narrow yet plainly wide enough for man or deer, indeed for a horse. Julia and Legrand must have happened upon the buck as he cut the dog to pieces with those flickering hooves, seen him swim under the waterfall, and in the heat of the chase followed. Perhaps they thought they would find him, at last spent from his wound, in the dry scooped-out place behind. What did they think, what consultation hold when they found themselves in that empty hollow, behind the falling water; and which one, he or she, first noticed the cleft in the rock, and the passage? Did it promise some rare adventure, some mystery, this animal sanctuary, which Beverly thought he alone could claim? And did they have to blindfold the horses? The eye widened. . . .

It showed plainly now what it was, the outlet into Parcher's Cove.

They came from under the mountain into the light of dawn. But it was still muted, and the brothers stood upon the rocky platform and looked down into the cove. A path, well worn and the dust of it stirred by hooves and paws, coiled between the boulders and shattered limestone to the floor down in front of them. Their sight was broken by the bare trees, except to the left where a cedar grove spread itself as far as the eye could see. The gray light, imperceptibly swelling, turned the evergreen boughs a dark purple. One large female tree stood out of the thicket. Its waxy berries, opalescent, picked up the light and the tree glowed like a tremendous fern in the shadowy low ground. The brothers' sight now came to rest upon what they had already seen, the buck hung to a sapling and drawn by a throng up to and over a limb of a post oak.

Duncan could not take his eyes from the buck. It hung, upside down, in the ignominy of all defeat. Was it of defeat he was thinking; or did he follow the buck as it turned from its trampled

enemy, the plaguing yelps at last silenced, to see the waterfall that hid the secret place as it showed the way? Did he follow it in his mind as it plunged into the pool to swim under the falls, into the muffled silence behind, to sanctuary at last, to the lassitude of triumph before its knees gave and its rapid heart fluttered to a stop? Or did the buck merely serve for concrete sign that Duncan's search was near its end? Did he need to hold back to gather himself as his brothers began the descent? He remained withdrawn even as he overtook them in his catlike glide; but at the small piece of new ground which they quickly reached he was full alert. Four other bucks hung from the trees upon the rim of the clearing. The horns of one almost touched the ground, as if the killers, tired or satiated, had grown impatient of their tasks. It could be seen the ground had been baited. The stumps were piled with salt and the ground about stamped and scuffed. Duncan was breathing heavily. Beverly said in a mumbling fury, "It's murder. That's what it is."

"She is all right, then," Dickie said evenly.

"I learned my pets to let me watch them lick the salt. Them two was bound to know they was pets, to get so close to shoot."

Duncan had already heard the stamp of the horses. He had found the short trail leading into the gloom of the thicket. Only he, whose sight had been trained to detect movement and not its object, could have seen the wisp of smoke. It was a short way in to the triangular glade. The cedar trees were big and gray with age. His brothers found Duncan stopped before the dead fire, as at some barrier he could not possibly cross. They passed to either side of him, walking carefully over rock splinters and the moss. At the base of the glade Julia and Pete Legrand lay upon a bed of fragrant boughs. She was upon her back, her head resting lightly upon his arm. A bearskin came up to their middles. He was turned towards her, his free arm around her waist, the fingers sunk among the green cedar boughs. Their sleep was deep.

As if the brothers had opened the way, daylight began to suffuse the glade. Their heads bowed down, the brothers made a rough circle about the two. At last her eyelids fluttered, opening fresh

and clear, without the film of sleep. She regarded her brothers gravely, as if it were only natural for them to be here, and then, almost casually, she looked towards the dead fire. A shadow passed her brow. Quickly she turned her head and hid it against Legrand's chest. The look and the recoil was instantaneous. It released Duncan at the rim of the fire's ash. He teetered, as if balancing precariously upon the edge of a precipice. His mouth hung slack, his eyes were set. Then his body fell forward. He stumbled, kicking at the ashes, and as he righted himself he had the Mexican barlow out of its sheath.

Julia had scarcely touched Legrand's chest before she was up, in front of him, looking small.

Legrand sighed and stretched his legs, lazily.

"I'll alter him," Duncan groaned, plunging.

Beverly met him.

"Hold now. We'll do this here thing right." He was matter-of-fact. He turned his back on Duncan and faced about. Dickie had taken Julia by the hand and led her out of the way. She followed like a disobedient child. Legrand was up now but in the daze of sleep. Slowly he ran his hand through his tousled hair; shook his blond head. He looked from brother to brother. When he had made the circle, he was thoroughly awake. Without a word he stripped off his shirt. He cast it aside. He said, "Which of you will it be?"

Beverly stepped out of the way. Duncan had tangled the laces of his shirt. Impatiently he cut them loose and then stood bare to his belt. Beverly waited until the shirt had settled to the ground; he seemed to reprove the haste; then, "You'll hold hands, and cut till one or the other falls." He spat as if a splinter had got in his teeth. "And listen. I don't want any of you ever in here again. Fergit you know the way. Parcher's Cove is my beat."

It seemed strange to think at such a moment that this would be the last time Beverly would act for the family, and then *he* saw how white Duncan's skin was. Legrand was darker, a trifle heavier. His

blond head made him seem darker still. Very simply he spoke, "I would like to say . . ."

"You aint got nothing to say," Beverly interrupted.

"I'll say it anyhow." He turned to Julia. She was not far away, but he looked, it seemed, into the far distance. "I'd hoped more luck in this. I've loved you from that first day."

She straightened her small bony shoulders, understanding at last what was about to take place. But it was too late. Dickie's grip tightened on her wrist. The two youths were advancing towards each other, Legrand remembering to slip the knife from his belt only after he had taken his first step. He held it up and before him. It had a thicker blade than Duncan's. They advanced slowly, warily. From the first they had joined their eyes. As they met, there was a moment of uncertainty.

"Hold hands," Beverly ordered.

Slowly, fumblingly, since they could not look, their hands reached for each other. Their fingers touched as tentatively, as gently, as lovers. With a thrust they slid into the clasp. There seemed to be something outrageously improper in the clasp of two left hands.

"All right," Beverly ordered.

There was an instant; then Duncan fainted at Legrand's throat, sliced downwards towards his crotch. Legrand was a little slow to parry, but his blade caught the other blade at the navel. But not to hold. Deflected, it slipped across his belly. A line as thin as a new moon appeared on his flesh. It darkened; opened wide as a mouth belching, and his guts began to spill. He turned loose, caught them, still facing Duncan with his knife at parry; then he grunted and stepped back. Wonderingly, he held the dull slick coils writhing in his arms. His gashed middle smoked in the chill of morning. He looked up in appalled surprise and carefully sank to his knees.

"The flaming sword," Jack whispered. "It was there all the time."

Julia thrust her hand to her mouth. Dickie beckoned to Jack and gently gave her to him. He picked up his satchel and walked

deliberately to the stricken youth. "Lie back," he said briefly. "Don't let them touch the ground."

Kneeling he spoke into his satchel. "Is there any water? Jack, pour your whiskey over my hands. Beverly, how far is Parch Corn's? Get some cover and bring it back. Skins. Blankets. Anything. Plenty of it. And make haste." He was carefully, skillfully replacing the intestines. Instead of obeying, all but Duncan watched the deft rapid fingers at their work. Julia had quietly drawn near and was holding Legrand's hand. He was sweating and breathing hard, his sight pitched far into the cedar tops. Dickie was threading his bodkin with gut. "Give him a bullet to hold in his teeth. You, Duncan, build up the fire."

"Let the hog lie in his guts," Duncan said sullenly. His knife was still in his hand. It had no blood on it.

Dickie looked briefly over his shoulder. "You do exactly as I say," and then, hovering, he began to stitch the wound. After a while he said, "There's no time to discuss details." His voice, reasonable, soothing, kept time with his hands. "We can repair as best we may our neglect of our sister. She must marry Joe Cree right away. I'll convince him. It won't be hard to do. Beverly forbids us Parcher's Cove." He paused; tied off a stitch; continued, "We've never been here. Remember that. Legrand was thrown and hurt. Duncan and I stayed behind to tend him. That's the story you will take back to camp, Jack, when you take Julia. And take her now. Julia, you must do your part too."

He marveled how well she dissembled, telling her story quietly, answering questions with ease, putting an end to questions by inviting the hunt to break up at their place. If they would help load the game, she and Jack could go ahead and make ready. . . . "I'll hold the lines," she said. "You can doze." The lines hung loose; the team pulled steadily; the wagon rolled out the quietude of the trace. The quiet enveloped team and wagon, whirling slowly upon the turning hub. At the center of its lidded eye he watched the silence spin out an invisible corridor, down which the vehicle traveled, as the team settled into a pulling walk up the long grade

of Penter's Hill. At the top they would reach the turnpike where it made the big bend between river and town, and where it straightened out the home place would show itself, seated above the pike and rolling field—then journey's end

the vehicle came to a halt, suddenly. The shafts ran forward, jerking his hat off

The heat poured down. The August heat. Knowing, not knowing, he grabbed for his hat. In that moment his consciousness retained its timeless spaceless plight: the long corridor he had traveled hung upon his sight; then his misty eyes blotted it . . . and there was the caked back of the horse, steaming; the buggy waited before the tollgate which barred their way. Beside him sat Lucius. To the southwest a few white clouds had gathered; a darker cloud, coming between the August sun and ground, made a sudden shadow on the pike. He held in this moment of pure clarity the knowledge of what corridor he had passed down, the long spiraling where vision reveals its essence, illumining the senses as it sheds their hulls until one sense, sovereign, refined out of natural usage, remains. His awareness focused upon this clarity, forever instantaneous, history the sun's blind light. He had the feeling, that long pause, of reaching towards this truth; almost he could put it together when the muffled sobs of the boy intruded.

"Now then, Lucius," he said, half turning towards him. And then he turned and looked directly at his nephew. Even now he found it hard to banish that other image, that companion of another time, another journey . . . the gateman was advancing. He saw Lucius could not abide the words forming in the bleary eyes, lurking under the old gateman's hat. He gave the sign to hurry. The ancient's eyes were milky; slowly they blinked as they took his meaning. Yet the amenities called for no haste. "Hit's a-fixing up to rain," the gateman said, unwinding the plowline from its peg.

The palsied hand tolled out the line at last; the gate pole

rose to unbar the way. Lucius shook the lines; he shook them again. The horse sighed and slowly stepped over the boundary. They drove a little way when Lucius spoke harshly. "It's my fault," he said.

"Hush, boy. Hush," he said, startled.

"When I did it up there with that girl, I knew. I knew something bad would happen."

The horse, feeling the comfort of the cloud's shadow, sensing too the familiar stall, picked up its steps. Jock showed that all his attention was on the muffled clop of the hooves, and then the words broke from his mouth,

"The snarl of fatality. Who can pick its thread? Do you dip up water and find the source of the stream? Will the pulse count betray the heart's folly?"

The Passionate Husk

The Lumber Inspector.

“He put me on my honor. That glorified peckerwood sawmill man Cree put me, Hopgood Schott, on my honor. All the other peckerwoods I’ve stole lumber from try to out-tally you and don’t know a windshake from a pinhole. I thought I knew the sawmilling game. Me, Hopgood Schott, sent into this country because I knew the finer points of the business, put on my honor. That’s a laugh but it aint. The firm had even raised me, that is for the finer points not the honor. I didn’t earn the raise but I took it. Like any man I take what I can get. How do you think the big shots got theirs? Nobody gave it to them and nobody ever gave anything to me. I mean to be a big shot myself. I thought I saw my start with this fellow Cree and then he goes and walks under not any tree but the biggest, the tallest, the tree the whole country locates itself by, and lets it fall on him.

“That’s why I’ve come to you, Mr. Legrand. I know with you it’s strictly business. I’ve a little proposition that will make us both some money.”

He paused to get his breath and bearings. The man Pete Legrand had not moved since Schott presented himself in the small office of the flour mill, except to say—State your business, sir. Not even for death did this Pete Legrand give a neighborly—Well, now that’s too bad. Only the eyes waiting, eyes speckled as a perch fresh out of water, waiting while he, Hopgood Schott, scuttled through the pause he had allowed for death, which common decency demanded, and the pause seeming never to end and the eyes

skinning him, accusing, so that he had blurted out—He put me on my honor. Now again he waited, while the man Pete Legrand in the long black coat dusted with flour, the square-toed boots and the blond hair standing up like a comb, unmoving, suddenly brushed his hand across his chin, and did it tremble before he jerked it away and walked to the office door? The door closed carefully upon the hollow cavern of the mill, upon the silence of August and drought and a dry millrace, upon the boulders in the river bed flaking mud, the river a sluggish branch twisting among green-scummed puddles, pocking the mud slick as satin, cracked by the sun. And the sun hovering beyond the small window, a thin glaze upon the panes, glazing the dust as light as drying mold.

Pete Legrand took a chair; motioned him to another. "Yes?" he stated.

"It wasn't only this honor, Mr. Legrand. I would have seen through that in time, but he knew how to keep things moving and the costs down. That's what fooled me. Any firm wants that. And he did it with no bookkeeper, no inspector, no yard boss, he did have a woods boss name of Leatherbury, a lean sour old bastard but could he cut trees. Wham, wham, wham—timed like that, I never did see him split a tree. No, sir, this Cree was the whole show: bookkeeper, timekeeper, inspector, buyer, seller . . . and carried it all in his head, and I mean carried it. I've seen him settle with his hands, tell them where they had been, what they had been doing or making out they were doing it every day of the week. If one of them didn't do his duty, that's what he called it, he gave him his time. He did this so easy, never raised his voice and you didn't have to lean over to hear either, sitting on a log, straight as a poplar, figuring on a piece of board or the back of a paper sack with the smell and the cheese grease fresh on it.

"God what a man. You wouldn't believe him if you hadn't seen him."

"I know; I knew Joe Cree," Pete Legrand said.

"No trouble to find him. At the last tollgate the woman who took my quarter—I always keep the right change ready for those

girls, you give them a bill and they'll fumble a whole day to the bottom of that apron pocket and bring up, one at a time, the nickels and dimes and coppers smelling of snuff and that other odor, and looking out at you from the shade of that black slatted bonnet, the eyes all a-glitter with some bad end for you. I don't like them and I don't like the smell of snuff, but, boy, I'm polite to them. This one said—You looking for Joe Cree's sawmill? I nodded. —You the fellow going to take up his lumber? I thought that come under the head of my business so I said—If you could just direct me. They all ought be on the police force the way they can worm information out of you. —He's cut right smart boards, she went on and I didn't ask her how she knew, never having moved any further than from the kitchen to the gate porch, but I was patient and a horsefly at my livery stable nag and the nag a little wild. —If you will just tell me, I said. Well, when she had only got out of me my name, where I was from, who I worked for, how much money I had in the bank, who I slept with last and was it good, finally she volunteered—The mill sets nearabout that there tree. That was a good one, I thought, really good, a sawmill by a tree. But then I looked up and over and saw it, its top rising up the side of a hill, I didn't believe it, I thought it was a small tract of timber, or the seed tree of the world. So I thanked her and drove on and found it, and he was there as if I had told him the exact second to meet me. You generally waste half a day finding your man and another eyeing each other like two stray dogs, but I looked up and there he was striding towards me and I had no more pulled up before he swung his leg over the wheel and held out his hand, all in one motion—Mr. Schott, he said, like he was handing me my name. Then he spoke to the horse—Go on, sir.

“Yes, sir, there he came towards me in that brisk military stride, as if that morning he had calculated just the second it would suit him for me to be there to make the swing around the woods and mill and no time lost. It never occurred to him that my ideas about getting there or time or interference would make any difference, me who had got on the cars a hundred miles and fifty

tons of cinders away, changed twice, missed one train and lay over a siding four hours, hired a rig and drove nineteen miles, stopped at four tollgates, he had calculated that too, and before I had time to take a drink of water we were up on the stacks.

"My policy with the peckerwoods is to lower a board a grade. He said—Whoa there, like I was a horse. That's a good clear board, he said. I got short with him. —It's a number two, I said. —Throw it out, he said. I had expected a little argument. They generally talk big but wind up taking my grade. But not him, not Captain Cree. He just said—Throw it out, and out it went. About an hour of this and we had more boards out than tallied. I was stumped. I had been told he had everything tied up down to his winter underwear on this tract of timber, and there's no quicker way to go broke than at the sawmilling game.

"You ever hear about the broke devil? Well, there was this devil, see, and this man. This man and this devil made a trade. I'll go to hell, this man said, if you'll give me anything I want while I'm upground and kicking. What do you want, the devil asked. Enough money to run a sawmill without going to the bank. I'll give you a million dollars, the devil said. The man shook his head. The most beautiful woman in the world. The man shook his head, a little slower, but he shook it. Sweat commence to pop out on the devil's horns and he scratched his tail. Look, he said, I'll give you a million dollars and a carload lot of women. The man considered this, and this time he shook his head mighty slow, but he shook it. The proposition, he said, comes twenty years too late. All I want is . . . Yes, I know, the devil said, enough money to run a sawmill without going to the bank. Well, a trade's a trade, but I'm sure one broke devil."

Hopgood Schott laughed and his laughter reverberated in the small room. He stopped abruptly. Pete Legrand neither laughed nor smiled.

"Get it? That's what I mean. Cree couldn't afford to be independent. But he just wouldn't let me take any boards away from him. I knew the firm had tried to buy the timber, offered almost

what it was worth, but the widow sold to him. If I know widows she had him hog-tied. I was puzzled. There he was just like he'd made this trade with this devil, see, standing up there on the stacks, looking away from himself. Then he dipped that hawk nose and those black satin eyes at me. —Schott, he said soft and sweet, everything, even a board, has its true value. I'll tell you what we'll do. Where there's doubt, you take one board and I'll take the next. That's fair and right. But every board has got to go into that barge close to what it's worth.

"He meant it. I began to think of all those cinders and toll-gates and my trouble and the firm wanted the lumber—it was well cut—and while I was thinking he said so soft I scarcely heard him—Otherwise I'll have to ask you down from the stacks.

"I don't know until now whether he was bluffing or not. The funny thing I got to like it, to find somebody knew nearly as much about grades as me. Did he sweat me? He had a nigger name of Jake. He would see a defect and flip the board quick. I'd catch him—I thought you's through, he'd say. Was I to let on a nigger hand, a calico one at that, was faster than me? Oh, they had me. No telling how many boards they put off on me. I'll tell you one thing. That was the fastest job of loading ever I did.

"That Jake.

"This hill country is above the color line. Those covites didn't mean for niggers to be up there. But that didn't bother the Captain. Some of those billies had been in his company during the war; he ran some kind of irregular outfit, he didn't join the Confederacy, just had his own private little war with the North. That just suited those covites fine. So they already knew him and agreed to let him use his nigger crew for the mill. I can hear him talking, how the crew had worked together and he'd see they caused no trouble and besides he needed white men in the woods. And he let out contracts for hauling to the river. You know, the old self-interest plus flattery plus he was going to do it anyway. They knew him, but they made up their minds to run those colored men to where they came from anyway.

"The freight car sat on the river barge. There was a long downhill shoot from the bank to the car door. Well there were three of those covites to shoot the planks and just one nigger loader inside the car to receive them, and they meant to kill him. But that nigger was Jake. They shot those planks, one on top of another, thinking to knock him in the head with one while he was busy with another. What they didn't know there's a sleight to it. They were using main force and awkwardness, but Jake had the sleight. He scarcely touched the boards. Well, the Captain said it was a sight, when the car was nearly loaded, to see that squirrel head of Jake's, a little scared now, dipping up and around the car door and the plank ripping down the slide until you'd think for sure it would go right through to the river and take Jake with it. But Jake wasn't handling the boards then, just the air around them. He burnt those white men out. They didn't even come for their pay. That's how the Captain handled the color problem, although I've never seen it as a problem.

"That's how he handled all his problems. A man aint nothing but a man, and if he won't be that man, the Captain didn't have any use for him. Black or white. If he was a man, the color didn't make any difference."

Pete Legrand was leaning slightly forward in his chair. His eyes were set as if spending in some private ecstasy. He said impatiently, "What's wrong with that?" And rose abruptly to walk to the small window, where he turned his back upon the visitor. The visitor, unnoticing, unable to notice, caught in his need to speak the complaint which was his defense, and speak it to a stranger out of some need which had annihilated strangeness and convention, so urgent a need that neither man seemed aware the strangeness had been rubbed away, that the small room, the office of commerce, had taken on a formal privacy beyond its function.

So, scarcely hearing the question, or noticing that the square black back had replaced the glazed eye, Schott spoke into the secret, flour-screened office. . . . "Nothing. There's nothing wrong with it. Only you've got no right to get people believing, into thinking

that's the way things are, that men can act out of honor in a daily way, that a man can always be a man, and then walk out and let a tree fall on you and mash people ten miles around. That's all that's wrong, to lie about the world and then run out on your lie.

"Oh, but the lie was a mighty lie and it worked as long as it worked. It began on me right away. The next time down I came all primed to not even stop the buggy, just slow down enough for him to jump in, so he wouldn't fret about the two-second stop the buggy would have to make. I even brought my water jug.

"And then when I pulled up he wasn't anywhere in sight

"just this boy

—Papa's at the mill, the boy said.

—Papa? I said like it was a new word

"The trouble with me is I've got a one-track mind. I couldn't take it in he wouldn't be there. So I looked at the boy, waiting in the politest way, holding and petting the horse, and I saw he wasn't no mill hand even if he had on work clothes. A nice kid about seventeen but a little light for the sawmilling game. He had an eye as clear as a May-washed window."

"Yes, yes," Legrand said under his breath.

"—You Captain Cree's son? He looked up—Yessir, I'm Lucius.

"He took me to the mill. The Captain had his hand on the shed post, watching the log they were sawing. He turned and waved and turned right back. It was a big log and pulling down the steam. To keep this kind of outfit sharp the woods have to work against the mill and the mill against itself. That's mainly the sawyer tries to pull the steam down. To have to blow off steam makes the sawyer look mighty sorry. He aint being himself, see. Well, that saw was whining through that log and the engine chugging almost to a stop and the carriage racing back and the firebox open and a young buck of a nigger sweating his color out, riding the shovel until the boiler began to shake. When the steam blew off, he'd come jiggling around and jerk his head at the sawyer. I never saw anything to look exactly like that sawyer. An old negro name of Peter, heavy, squat, he might have been a walnut stump,

with a belly out in front like he'd swallowed a melon. Had on specs somebody had given him so gummed over with dust and sweat if one of the glasses hadn't been gone he never would have seen what he was doing. After a while those planks sliced like butter. The offbearers stayed bent over. My, but were the Captain's eyes merry. He shouted to me—He's got old Pete on the run. If you could get a mill turning out boards like that you'd never need to worry about banks or devils or anything else. They come to a big gum and it really pulled that steam down. Midways in the log, just to show the fireman he had him, old Peter dropped his hand and stuck that great big old belly of his against the stick and pushed it through. The Captain laid back his head and laughed. Then he took me by the arm and walked over to the buggy his boy brought up. He jumped in and said—I've got to collect toll on the pike today. You go ahead and take up the lumber.

—Hold on, I said. Who'll inspect for you?

—Nobody. Just tally up what's there.

—But look, I said. I'm working for this firm, not you. Who'll take care of your interest?

—You, he said.

—Me?

—I put you on your honor. Just mark down what the board's got in it. That will take care of me and your firm, too.

—Hold on, I said.

—Take Lucius along and show him how to tally.

“And with that he was off, the horse at a fast trot, tail up and farting and Lucius standing there smiling at me. —I'll get the buggy, he said.

“It wasn't right. Working for two men and paid by one and teaching free that boy Lucius and watching calico Jake all at the same time. I was ready for bed that night. But did I go to bed? No. I was on the back of a mule riding up hills a spider would slip off until finally, when the moon come up, we stopped, all of us, black and white, dogs and men, and the boy Lucius. They turned the dogs loose and made a fire so quiet you would have thought it

was against the law. They sat down around it and never spoke, listening to the night. I tried to make a little conversation, and that old woods boss Leatherbury said—Shhh . . . I could feel the ticks crawling, the woods was full of them, seed ticks, yearling ticks, old ticks. They kept me awake, that tired I was. I guess I'd have dropped off if the jug hadn't made the rounds. Lucius handed it to his papa. He smelled it and then passed it to me. I took a good man's swig and let her burn. I'm not a drinking man, but I knew it would let me last the night. They all took a drink like their mind wasn't on it; even the niggers had a jug. After that they talked a little, but they tolled the words out like the last coins in the family sock. Then way off below a dog opened up. Every head came up like a turkey's. Leatherbury whispered—That's old Belle. After a while somebody—No, that's Queenie. They disputed about it. How could they tell which dog it was that far off? They sat there and listened like they'd staked their wives on the race, a poor sort of racing when you couldn't even see the dogs run. They ran clear out of hearing. They had opinions as to where the dogs had gone until after a while the Captain said—Boys, they've gone to the Peaks. They won't be back until morning. We'll let John Henry round them up. The rest of us might as well go back to camp. And then he turned to me and said—I had hoped to give you a better race, sir. I said—Looks pretty good to me. You ran the dogs clear out of hearing. That brought the only genuine laugh of the evening.

“While the others hitched the mules, the Captain stepped over to the brow of the ridge and looked out at the night. He said, low—Come here, Schott. He waved his hand, taking it all in and under the moon that was a lot. —There's ten years' cutting and a fortune out there. I looked and there was nothing but trees, in the coves and valleys and on the ridges. He was right, and as I stood there I had the funny feeling he was reading my mind. Then as if it hurt him to see it, he turned away and we started back to camp.

“The next day was Saturday and only half a workday. I had planned to run into town, but he told me I looked a little tired and to lay over Sunday and he would show me something. I didn't

hold back much, it wouldn't have done me any good, and besides I'd been thinking about what he'd shown me from that ridge. Well, we set out for the woods through the timber he had bought from the widow, and it was a pretty track. He took me right to the best of it, and I saw the firm didn't know what they had let get by them. The woods were deep and he sailed along as if he had a compass in the top of his head, always looking up at the trees, never where his feet were going. He'd already told them to keep out of the way of snakes. I'd never talked to mine. I'd always figured feet were to walk with and let it go at that. So if I hadn't been looking I'd a stepped smack on the biggest copperhead, the granddaddy copperhead of that region. He'd stirred it up for me on the moss side of a down log as he went over. I jumped straight up. —Didn't you see that snake? I shouted. —Snake? he asked, slowing a trifle. He didn't even look back. —Never saw a snake in the woods in my life.

“Can you beat that? I forgot the snakes myself when we stopped at the place he wanted to show me. There must have been thirty white oaks to the acre and there must have been ten or twelve acres all together and just alike. It was cool and the shade deep for the sun never got through to the ground here. He went from tree to tree and beat each one of them lightly with his fist. —Look at this, he would say in awe. Or this.

“I came right out with it. —How'd a man like you outbid the smartest operators in the state?

—They didn't know what was here.

—They didn't know this maybe, and I took in the white oaks, but they knew what else was here.

“A merry twinkle came into his eyes. —Maybe they were looking for moccasins when they cruised it.

—All right, I said, but how'd you do it?

“He looked at me as if I was a child. —I've hunted every foot of this land.

—I forgot, I said. The new way. Business, pleasure's by-product.

—Schott, this is too good for lumber. This is Grand Rapids stuff. Golden oak.

"I got what he meant. Mahogany was out of fashion. Golden oak and walnut was the fashion now. I just sat there and looked at him, wondering what ever made me take him for a peckerwood.

—Quarter sawed, this will pay me out and the rest profit.

—I've got to hand it to you, I said.

"And then he made me the proposition. It was for me and that boy Lucius to go into the lumber business with him as a kind of Chairman of the Board. He could buy it right and cut it right, and I knew the markets and could sell it right. But first I was to sell this quartered oak to Grand Rapids on a commission. It would sort of whet their appetite for the big bait we could buy together. Of course this was my chance, but I wanted to get my bearings. It looked too good and he was too smart. So I said just to give me time—Now tell me how did you manage to outbid the firm? They offered cash, and I'm told you didn't have it.

"I saw I was whispering. Here we were with our heads leaning towards each other and he listening to himself and the air it dead and still, eavesdropping us. In that shade, under those trees with not a limb for sixty feet it gave me the feeling of being in church, not that Sunday starched feeling but the real thing. It got so quiet that when a twig popped, I jerked.

—Schott, there is something else. He looked up and down, as if it was awful hard to get out. —My purchase has engaged me and Amelie Croleigh in a contest of honor.

"I just looked at him. Was this a child? What was he? —You mean the widow?

"He nodded. —She blames me for her weeds. He spoke so sad.

—You killed her husband?

—She in a sense feels I did.

—Let me get this straight. You killed her husband for her and she sold you the timber cheap out of gratitude. I must say that's a new way to stop competition and get rich, too, if you widow all the women tired of their men. It sure will revolutionize the timber business.

"He looked shocked, but I was doing the best I knew. —You misunderstand me, he said coldly. —I didn't kill him. Only great

sorrow could hold me to blame. Then his eyes compelled mine. —He was my cousin and brother-in-law. Just like that, as if that made it impossible, if relatives hadn't been doing one another in ever since Adam was run out of the garden. —He was killed in line of duty, under my command. She blamed me. So immoderate is her passion.

—You'll have to excuse me, I said. What's that got to do with her turning over to you about the finest tract of timber in the state?

—Greed.

—Greed?

—In love and hate. I went to her and said—I'll give you a chance to settle this old score between us. Once and for all. Sell me this timber at a price I can pay and I'll agree to cut it in half the time any mill could do it. If I can do that, I'll make enough to educate Lucius, restore the farm, and have capital to work with. If I fail, I ruin my son's future.

—She took you up?

“He bowed his head. That ought to warn me. But how was I to know. He bought it under the nose of the smartest operators in the business. It would have to be no uncommon trade to do that. Still I ought to know. The odds he took. Nobody could cut that much timber in the time allowed. Then it came to me.

—That golden oak. You gambled on that.

—I gambled on old Peter. He's the fastest quarter sawyer in the business.

“I stood up. —All right, I'll do it.

—Shake on it, he said.

Schott paused and regarded the back which Pete Legrand still presented him from before the small glazed window. The back was rigid. The rigidity was like a shut door. Suddenly he felt he had not been heard and he had to be heard and understood. He raised his voice, “Don't you see?” He began again, changing tone to leave out the plea. He had no plea to make unless it was to be understood. “Don't you see something always goes wrong when you do business in an unbusinesslike way. He lets this tree fall on him and my prospects. I made it up to myself as best I could.”

"You made it up? How?" Peter Legrand turned suddenly.

"I re-tallied that last barge at a lower grade. That gave me a nice profit. He owed me that."

"You lowered the grade?" Legrand's voice was clipped, his gaze level and cold.

"Sure I did."

"And Joe Cree had put you on your honor?"

"That's how I could do it. But he was dead. His heirs can't do a thing about it."

"But he put you on your honor?"

Schott heard himself say petulantly, "He would have wanted me to have it, after what he promised me."

Pete Legrand walked swiftly to his desk. "What's your proposition, sir?"

"Well, I thought you could buy his rig and the equity in the timber. You can buy it cheap. The heirs will have to sell. We could carry out his idea. You're a rich man, Mr. Legrand. You can handle it. It would make a nice profit for years."

Pete Legrand allowed for the smallest pause; the silence from the mill hummed in the office. He said, "You are a fool and a knave. Good day, sir."

Schott hung there, neither sitting nor standing, hung to his amazement rising from the chair, as if he were hooked, his head thrown up and back against the pull of his own dead weight and upon his face not anger but disbelief, that money could ever refuse to make money. This he could not but must now accept and the acceptance blanched through his weathered skin as he jerked upright, lost now, knowing it but not yet accepting it, for he had come to the flour mill, not so much to make a trade, hoping maybe, but knowing only Joe Cree could make it work, as to be restored to the belief that the means did not matter, the end was all. . . .

"Well, I must say, Mr. Legrand . . ." He tried to show anger, but the anger rang hollow.

"Good day, sir," Pete Legrand said and looked away. He dipped a pen in ink and leaned over the heavy bound ledger and waited

until he heard the lumber inspector bump against the door on his way out. He heard him try to slam it but the floor sagging caught it, the poor fool couldn't even do that to restore his self-esteem. The poor knavish fool, never to know that the end ever can be more or less than the sum of what has gone to make it, or that a man can be more or less than what he is. He heard the man's steps ring loud in the hollow mill and then cease. Now he could look up. But he was not yet alone. The man was on the loading platform, his head bowed and the constant blaze of the sun was all about him. At last he walked away, head still down, as if he were breaking water. What was his name, Schott, born to be the counter in other men's moves. How he knew these counters. Now. Now.

he must say it before the body shudder would loose the chill and shaking. *Julia*, he whispered. All other names names, her name a caress. A tree and a knave had made her his at last. This was better than he had hoped. All he had ever hoped was that she would be free before it was too late. Nineteen years he had waited, through war, running contraband cotton at a dollar a pound, through one trade after another when he couldn't lose, to blot out time while she slept in Joe Cree's arms. A cold twinge lashed the old scar across his belly and he leaned forward to ease it. No longer need it burn to remind him. Cautiously he drew himself upright and stood in the presence of himself. He wore the best broadcloth now, but the clothes he had had on that morning, twenty years ago, as he rode into her yard would fit him still,

by the well-kept fence, raised two rails higher than most, all around the pasture to the side of her house, with a branch running down the middle and filled with wild mule colts. The mare he rode quickened her step, nodding fast, and the colts ran down to the fence with their light stiff pace and his mare threw up her head and whinnied. He held her in as the colts trotted along the fence, their slick black faces turned to the road until, for no reason, like colts, they swirled and broke, kicking, their heads swung awkwardly down darkening the pasture like a shadow with tattered

edges, and then over the branch they dropped their muzzles to lip the lush summer grass.

All except six. He had thought there was no reason, but if it was not the reason at least the trigger to spring the trap for him. But trap was not the word though. The two riders had cut these six colts out and were driving them towards the lot back of the house. The riders were young, that was his first impression; his next that they would remain perpetually young. He remembered this now, for it had seemed strange that he would be so impressed. One of them slight, supple as a switch, hair bouncing beneath a soft crushed hat, and shouting at the other in a high clear voice. Brothers, he had thought. Very trim. And then he saw they were dressed both in buckskin. He kicked his horse and followed, up the banjo drive towards the house, the bridge fallen in and yet the fences were kept, the pastures good, and the house although it lacked paint sat square and solid among the cedars. He turned aside, splashed through the creek, up the slope, towards the teaming barn lot.

The older rider looked back and called to him to shut the gate. That shout, Close the gate, shut out all that up to that moment he had been and shut him in with them and his Fate. That morning he had left the county seat, directed to this farm, the Cropleigh holding, where he was told he could be guided to the land he had inherited. These were the commonplace facts, but is a fact ever commonplace? There should be some clear sign for the fateful moment; some pause to interpret that call; but the edge of the whirlpool seems ever to offer comfort and reprieve from the usual violence. He did not even think it odd that he should be spoken to as if he were one of them, watching the colts, as the younger rider circling kept them moving towards and around the open barn doors. The older brother served for pivot, holding ground gained, moving forward, giving only to regain, until one of the colts broke into the dark maw of the barn hall. The rest followed, fleeing into the trap. He noticed their coats, slick and shining, dulled the instant they reached the threshold. And then the doors

banged to. From inside came sounds of bodies striking walls, and once the heavy doors shuddered from a blow. After this the commotion stilled. In the silence he heard the clear sweet voice which would forever be his song, "Bubba, that did it."

Duncan was leaning against the doors, his horse close by, while his own heart shivered, he had thought from the skill displayed, *oh but the heart has ears and eyes of its own*. "I'll hold the tar bucket," the voice again, the words thrown away in the act of dismounting.

The two were side by side.

Duncan, speaking slowly, "You can't go in."

Suddenly he felt alone in the barn lot.

The other, imperiously petulant, "I will."

"Now, sis, do I have to go to the trouble of tying you up?"

He had known all along that it was she.

"I will learn," she said, "to alter those hoss colts."

A girl dressed like a boy, plainly a girl now, scarcely coming to her brother's shoulder; yet there was in her body all the concentration of a hummingbird, or wasp, poised before its object. Then her fists were flailing her brother's chest, and the brother waiting until she tired. She stopped all at once. Her brother said, "This stranger will hold the tar bucket."

Those words seemed to make them aware of him and they turned together, their movements seemed always together. They looked at him curiously, and he back at her. He could see her eyes were blue and shattered by tiny hard lights. Her anger passed as a shadow passes, and she took him in carefully, with the open unabashed stare of a child. She was scarcely more than a child, he saw, thirteen or fourteen. But even so the boyish clothes could not disguise the small swell of her breasts. His gaze must have lingered there, in puzzlement only, for when he sought her eyes again they had darkened.

She was striding towards him and he dismounted to meet her. She barely paused, whispering as she passed, "He's quick at it. Sometimes he can't resist. But runs the knife all the way in."

Then she was gone and the tawny eyes of the other were on him. The distance between them was not great, certainly not enough to disguise the indifferent brute stare which fixed him. He could not turn to follow the disappearing girl. He returned stare for stare, but he reached no further than the dry glazed orbs which told him nothing. They reflected nothing; they expressed nothing. He had the uncomfortable sense of being in the presence of a creature who saw best at night. The voice was slow and casual. "Hitch your horse. When I call, unbutton the door and come inside."

The call was peremptory but muffled. He slipped into the barn, and the dry dust of the manure almost choked him. Through the door cracks shafts of light impaled the gloomy air. The dust motes whirled furiously. Breathing carefully, he went up to Duncan, who was leaning against the rump of a colt, his hand pointing to the tar bucket. "Quick," he said. The colts were all in one large stall, packed so tightly they could not move. Their heads reaching up stretched in frozen twisting curves; a tail raised and he heard the bowel empty itself of its terror. Then the knife was out. For an instant it sliced the swirling, glittering shaft of light; and then the brother turned. Stooping slightly, the left hand went between the trembling legs. Deftly, swiftly the knife moved in. "Daub it," he said. He followed with bowl and daub, as in some reversal of ritual the hand went in and down, then across, and the useless gold dropped underfoot.

Christ! Why did it . . . why did he see that knife? His scar tightened its lace of pain. Bent down in spite of himself, he waited; then carefully he drew his body upright. He could feel the circlet of sweat upon his brow.

"That scar of yours, Big Pete. It's some weather prophet. The drought will break."

He looked up. There was Saul Slowns standing in the office door.

"Yes," he said. And then, "Yes."

But the heart's drought. It dries the green dust even of spring. But no season lasts. There is no weather but turns to the harvest, if you can wait . . . if only . . . and I have waited for my love. *Mine now*. And no man can say me nay. Waiting, he had said her name behind the lips, the parched lips. Clamped by the teeth down the slow years, the whisper whispering in the tiny veins. No more could he allow himself. He could not say, It is a mistake, her place at another man's board and bed. Called by his name. It was I, Pete Legrand, who made her a woman, who gave her a son, a son who does not know his father. But if the father knows and cannot make known his knowing. Banished. That's what he'd been. Exiled at home. The homing stranger. The near so far, the far too close. But now the long dry season is over. Now he would claim his own.

"The buggy's ready," Slowns said.

He looked at Slowns, reminding him of the business he had to do. How dull it seemed. But he must keep his grip. If he hurried he could get it over and back in time to dress and go pay his respects to the dead. So he would act, and so it would seem. Life the sly deceiver . . . He felt a twinge of nostalgia. The patient rabbit eyes of Slowns, those eyes that were always too open, saw too much. But Slowns knew how to keep his mouth closed. The old life, the life in which he had so depended upon Slowns, was dead. The new life would leave little in it for Slowns. He said, "Did you find anything to toll the carriage horses?"

"Nothing but plow lines."

"Will they be stout enough?"

"Unless something scares the horses."

"That's not likely."

"You never know," Slowns said carefully, in his clipped Yankee speech, "on a pike."

"I'll close this ledger and we'll go," Legrand said.

As he followed Slowns from the mill into the buggy, he looked up and saw that the sky was the sky once again. No more the burning void, hatching dust. And as they jogged along the slow miles, it kept the old familiar look, hovering the ground, fleeced with

clouds, and a great cumulus heaped up before the sun like weighed-up cotton.

For a mile now the fields on both sides of the pike would be cotton fields. The wagons stood scattered here and there for the harvest. Their slim tongues propped up to hold the scales were poised like antennae above the crop; the scales tied by a trace chain hung from the tongue's ring, balancing the air . . . and the wagons like insects gorged to death on the harvest. Here and there a whole field was stripped of its white bolls, and through the stiff brown stalks the gashed red ground showed how spent it was. But most of the fields lay both brown-stalked and white as the pickers, their sacks dragging in the brown, their hands licking the tufted bolls, crawled toward the fence rows. Before his eyes the dragging sacks were bellying to hatch in the fields they ate. But the fact, he knew, was otherwise. They'd already eaten the crop and, for many of the pickers, they'd eaten the seed not yet in the ground. Some were eating the ground. Dirt daubers. That's what they were. "Dirt daubers," he said aloud, "eating the ground."

"They'll soon suck mud," Saul Slowns remarked, and cut his eye at the sky. "There's a heap of weather up there."

The two horses they were tolling seemed to be swimming in the dust they kicked up, but the sky would soon settle the dust, all of it. Yes, it was coming, the rain, and it would be a gulley-washer. The downpour was slowly gathering in the northwest. Everywhere the sky was closing down. Everywhere it touched the hot dry ground, and the ground helpless, exposed, forever received without choice what the sky let down. It would always be so. The long scorching was over, but the threat remained. It curled with the leaf; it hung upon the choking haze that obscured the pike. The cotton pickers seemed to crawl through it secretly, as if for breath. A man's a fool to work so, to depend upon the seasons. Look at that one now, looking doubtfully at the sky, not knowing whether to be thankful for the shade and the promise of rain or apprehensive, kneeling before almighty power, back humped, arms stiff upon his thighs. Like some effigy depicting resignation. The man's gaze

even was stony. Was the gaze coming to rest upon him? He leaned over the side of the buggy to make sure, and turned back quickly. It looked like a man who owed him money. He had no time to be hailed today . . .

Him

It's him.

Away he goes

It don't make that

Pete Legrand no diffunce

hit's a-fixing up to rain. Wind
and water can beat out the cotton, he'll
still gin it. He'll take his toll, good
grade or bad. He don't pay none.

Whur's he a-tolling them bays

s'fat and pretty? Turn

around, chillen.

Pick it.

Pick.

. . . he turned too sharp. His scar, it caught him. Sometimes he could forget it, sometimes, but it was always there, a gapped scythe stitched to his belly. Damp weather always ached it, a throb at a stitch. Carefully Pete Legrand drew himself upright and caught beneath the buggy seat and pulled. It was like stone ache. The only way was to pull. That did it, but in a rainy spell he had to take the hurting
you're hurting me

she was a switch swaying, O Julia, before whom the trees parted, supple in the saddle, erect but pliant and when they came out into Parcher's Cove and hung the deer, it was as if they had gone back in time, the world simple as the first day, the cedar grove holding the heat from the fire as a room might

Bubba's suit is too tight. It's rubbing me.

I've some rawhide. I'll make laces.

On the log he cut the strips straight and thin. He slit the last

of the hide, lightly, and looked across at her, his companion. Sitting back on her heels, head curved swan-necked, she seemed to have forgotten his presence. Her hands deftly clasped the bone-handled blade. She punched-cut holes in the garment. It sprawled between her thighs like a shadow. She had undressed before him with no more shame than a boy at a swimming hole. He had paid no more attention than if he, too, had been such a boy but had gone about gathering wood and the last bough he picked up seemed as the first, as if he had made but one motion, as if he had never begun and so could never end. And the fire leaping lightened the dark, the cedar boughs crackling, the rich oil exuding, wavering in the draught like ribbons aflame and the draught curling in its upwards plunge out of the hot center turned the grove upon the axis of a scent, aromatic, rinsing the air damp and thick, layered of earth-mold, leaf mold. The odor of cedar reamed his nostrils, rose to his giddy head. He could feel his muscles, limp and heavy from the chase, quicken. In this seasonless grove of cedar he had arisen, light as a butterfly, fluttering the evergreen reflection into which the flames rolled. The air pitched with the color and motion of the sea. Its chaste scent was as astringent as sea water. The laces entwined in his fingers, falling, undulated like seaweed. He crossed over as indifferent as a fish, paused in wonderment when his body, coming between her and the firelight, dissolved into its shadow, and the shadow merged with her nakedness. Instantaneously shadow and flesh together shrank towards the ground. Only her hair, aureate, glistened as it floated into the firelight's surging. Each writhing golden strand fractured his marble eyes. At that instant she looked up. Their smile met in the space between. And then the bearskin glided from off her shoulders. She was entirely exposed: he saw only how pitifully frail her shoulders were. Quickly he seized the skin to cover her up, and this brought him to his knees before her and, startled, she leaped up, shivering, poised like a doe upon flight. Drenched by the warm light, her body glowed and in this glow her skin shifted its shape. His kneeling eyes began the old ritual afresh, as his knees pressing into the pliant earth released its

fecund odor to crawl thick and languid up his thighs, to stifle his breath. The thump of his heart beat his ears like a drum. His lips swayed into the soft-giving flesh to shudder with the shuddering of her being. His senses drowned in the fragrance of the rose. It was not until she began to struggle that he was aware his hands clasped her and that they would not for a time release her

a plunging jerk . . . the buggy whip snapped and quivered its length into the socket . . . "Goodness," he said, "what a washout."

"Drought or flood, they damage the same," Saul said.

"Strange. Joe Cree said that, not long back."

"A man's words keep when he don't," Saul said, "if they are good enough."

Joe Cree. The name fell between them like a spell, and the black gums blazed in the countryside. The buggy rolled upon its wheels straight upon the hard muted and fluid surface of the pike, the narrow margin of safety, defined by the snaked fence rails . . .

"Timber cutting is sure some widow maker," Saul said.

Widow. Julia a widow. But wait. They would expect her to wear her weeds for a year. Would there be no end to this waiting? He had thought of six months as a decent time, and six months it would be. No matter the talk. If they talked too much, some would find the cost of speech high. Julia, Julia!

Miss Jule Cree, that's real trouble. I always say there's something to be thankful for. They say that tree broke ever bone in his body, and when they picked him up his flesh rolled like jelly. We got a short crop and the pond dry and the well mud, until looks like we can't get this little crop picked for hauling water but she's got a short crop and dry wells and her man dead in the house. Say as you will she's got hands to do for her, it's not the same. I've got Mister Dunnaway to do for me, when I heard of her trouble I said to Mister Dunnaway, I've got you Mister Dunnaway and no hand will do for you like your man can, wonder what makes him so long coming with that water. He's been gone since before light

Sis Laura, aint that dust a-rising on the pike? I declare I be

glad to wet my mouth. Out of snuff. Out of water. A body's teeth do git dry.

That's no water wagon, sister. Dust a-rising too fast. I take it to be a drummer. Who but a drummer could spare himself to trot the pike in gathering time. I declare Mister Dunnaway can fret a body, he don't take no record of time a-passing. And he aint as peart as once and his water's backed up on him I named it to him to go to Doctor Croleigh, I said to him I can't wash it out of your long underwear, it's going to rot it for sure and this dry time and water scarce as it is and the time and all for hauling but you know what that man said to me? He said, I can turn a pebble over three foot in front of me. I just told him, what you can do and can't do, Mister Dunnaway, is no news to me

Children. That's all they are. Ever last one of them ought to be stood in a barrel of lye.

Yes. Yes now. Ever old woman ought to be shuck out, at day dawn.

You hush, Josiah. Go weigh up that cotton.

Lawd, that's no drummer, sister. That's Mister Legrand. I do feel sorry for him, with all that money and no woman to do for him. Nobody to leave it to. It equals out someways, now don't it?

Who's that in the other seat?

That's that Yankee fellow you know Saul Slowns he calls himself. Stopped by on his way home after the war. A right clever fellow.

Wonder why he don't go home. Reckon he's got no folks?

I aint heared. Some say he was shot, you know, there. I guess he were shamed to go home.

You reckon?

I've no way of knowing. You can't tell. You know how folks talk. They'll rumor anything.

Won't they now.

Yes, that's him. That's that Saul Slowns.

"First I saw this land, Big Pete, the spring equinox had come and gone. But the land didn't know it, all a-quiver in winter's mud and a thin crust of ice to trap the foot. It seemed to me a hard thing in a land I called South to sink up to my calf in a mud binding as glue, colder than cold, ice splinters spewing out of the ground like a rotten frost. You can stand ice when it's clean and bright. It looks pure anyway. The frozen promise. But this ice was dirty and over the muddy puddles in those ditches thousands of boots had missed or avoided, it was sheeted as thin as hope and the color of pus. That was sixty-two. I was a young recruit hell bent to save the Union."

"Well, you saved it."

"And you, Big Pete. Maybe you saved it, too, and got paid to boot. Whereas I . . ."

He let Saul's voice fall away. The strain of the drought, was it telling even on him, for surely he was not given overmuch to confession. Was there some small part of envy in him, whose devotion he had never tried to measure but had taken for what it seemed? He had never thought how it might be, how Saul would think he'd made money out of death. Plant blood and you sell death short. He himself had had little part in this. It had happened he was in a position to seize cotton, with a Federal escort for the wagons. What if he got a dollar a pound for it? He didn't make the price any more than he'd made the war. And he took some risk. So long ago now it seemed, and of so little moment he'd forgotten what a stake it was. And for sure he was no man to bury his talents. Yet it had not mattered whether he won or lost on that throw. It was no legal tender for his wants. It would not buy vengeance, for Duncan Croleigh had been killed, and not by his hand. When news of that death reached him, he had quickly transferred to the Quartermaster's Corps. To Duncan, then, he owed his fortune. He heard

himself half grunt, half laugh. "Saul, before you speak of pay, you better know the currency a man deals in."

Saul looked at him now directly. He met Saul's gaze; looked away as the veil of privacy ripped.

"So . . ." Saul said.

Pete answered hastily, "I was a Whig. I fought for the Union cause. There's a difference."

"But did it win?"

"If you mean did I win. No."

"But you hoped. That your presence, your presence itself on the other side might cause all who stood in your way to perish, and then she . . ."

"Hush," Pete said. "How can you know, a stranger to this country, its enemy who dropped by and I took you in out of charity, or some common need of solace, when all here turned their backs—all but Joe Cree."

"Aye. Joe Cree."

"Aye. He treated me as a man of honest conviction. He saw proof in my risk of life and limb. Did he see in me maybe himself? You say I got paid to boot? What coin had I to match that? A man who can be whipped, lose all his goods or have them ruined, and when it's over treat me, the enemy as a man, who, like himself was only fortune's toy, but the toy to come out on top. Top or bottom, it made little difference if you were a man. That was Joe Cree. He shamed me into honor, for I was a partisan like the rest. Yet there was that between us which was my secret and not his, which burned my tongue as it taught me honor has its folly too. So in the end I minted a coin to tell a higher carat than his. It rings on the barrel head, pure, the alloy stamped into my guts. It will purchase, Saul. It will buy. I don't know why I tell you this, and yet I know well enough. We are banished men."

"Banished? Are not all men?"

The horse slowed for Penter's Hill, as if out of care, as if the ruts and holes would spill their brimming thoughts. From the thick woods crowding the narrow bending way up, the air drank the reek of animal sweat and the rancid harness. They rolled through it up

to their eyes, as through an underwater ford until at last the horse lurched onto the brow of the hill and stopped to blow in the clean rare air.

"But I am reprieved," Pete Legrand said.

And Saul, "It's the alloy makes it ring. What till passes twenty-four carat?"

"Time. And do I know it, that till. Has my coin not rung there, and each time with a lighter tone, as I waited? Not to spend but being spent all the same, that's the cost of waiting. Each day you seem diminished, but it's the dross that is spun away. Who but me knows this so well? But there were moments when I misdoubted, for there are times when gold in its hoard seems common dust. So accustomed are we to be firmed by dross. I have bought empty days and years. I know their cost. But the account is settled now. What a lift to the feeling when the ledger is balanced and you have paid for what you have bought. There are not many. Look about at these fields. One season's drought. Who could wait it out? Well, mighty few. Each morning they look to the sky for relief, and each evening note how the corn has fired a little more. Or how the cotton droops. I've watched the strain on patience tighten, for stress does not add. It multiplies. And then it comes, the break, the snap of the will like a popping thread. Not idleness, emptiness is the devil's shop. Each man fills it after his fashion, but fill it he must. Some take to drink, some to whoring. Some leave the country. And the saddest folly of all, those who go to town and buy on the strength of failure. That's a ghostly money, but debt is no ghost. These bays we are tolling. A month ago they belonged to Squire Drumgoole. A sensible enough man. But what does he do? He buys a barouche he doesn't need and can't afford and sells the very team he means to draw it with as part payment on the deal. There's a clause, he's not that lunatic, that he can buy them back plus feed and care when he sells his hogs. And the pigs are there. He could count them. But what he couldn't count on was the cholera, and yet he was counting it all along.

"So you get a three-hundred-dollar team for half its value and a buggy at cost."

"Barouche. I held old man Salter's note. It was a good way to take it up. But that's just an example."

"It may be an example to you, Big Pete, but when you drop me at the Squire's gate and I have to ride into his yard with his own team and take his own buggy out of his buggy house, with his wife peeping behind the blinds, and him maybe to help hitch up . . ."

"Barouche."

"Barouche, then."

Kill one fly. Ten come to the funeral. It's the change in the weather. A sure sign of rain. Well, I be glad to see it. Adolphus, bring that brush and shoo the flies off this mixing bowl. Bake this cake I will. It's the least I can do for her. There's little enough you can do for Julia Cree, but I always say neighbors ought to be neighborly. Let's see, here's the flour, I guess there's enough sugar on that loaf I need two more eggs. Now Adolphus while I go to the hen house you lift the butter out of the well and if you spill that butter I'll skin you alive. It's the last sweet butter on hand half the cows dry and those giving milk falling off every day I don't know what we're going to do and Mister Bascom such a hearty eater and the children and all and not a cook in the kitchen. You just can't keep them in cotton-picking time, and you can't blame them they make more money. What's that?

The old sow's out again, mama.

Get the hoe, get the axe, you Adolphus, catch that well rope, mercy, thank God you didn't drop it, that butter down the well and where would my cake be? Listen, run she's caught a hen, sweet loving Jesus, enough's enough. A woman can stand only so much. I told him to fix that pen, I told him you can't patch it up and hold her, that's all he ever knows to do. Patch up. I'll fixit the first rainy day, I'll fixit after first Monday, I'll fixit after the crop's laid by. Don't I know him, Mister Fixit Bascom—Head her for the barn!

Watch out, mama. You near missed me with that stick of stove wood.

Eating my bulbs, rooting up my yard, scratching her old self on the front steps, if we could only sell her lice, we'd be rich enough—all right, just turn her on the commons. And bar the gate. That'll fix her. That'll fix it once for all. You hear me, Adolphus? I don't care what your pappy says. And then you come lift that butter out of the well. Bake that cake I will, if it's the last thing I do. It's little enough in her time of sorrow, with all those people coming to the funeral. And she to feed them. You'd think when they die, they'd leave you in peace. At least when they die you can let up on the cooking. Just look at these eggs. Mashed. Nests ruined. No eggs. Here's one. Well, one's better than none. I'll just have to skimp it. Maybe the icing will patch it up. I'll make it extra thick. I wish to God I had never seen Mister Bascom!

There was no sound at all upon the top of Penter's Hill; but there was a coolness, you couldn't call it a breeze, slipping so light from the woods not a leaf rustled. He'd let the horse blow a while, he'd never seen her so spent, the dust caked like axle grease over her back, and so still, her tail slapping from side to side as if out of its own motion, as if all motion had now drawn into the tail. Pete sighed and overlooked the knobs and hillocks dropping before him. He always liked the view from here, with the road winding through the ridges, and the valleys sloping away into their privacy and with the look, at least, of peace. And then it happened as it always happened, but what a difference today as his gaze leaving him sought that window, blinking like an eye, in the toy house pasted upon distance. And yet through the gap it was there, that room in the second story of the ell. She slept there in a real house, upon real foundations, in that one certain spot. But here, upon the slope of the hill, at this distance, he made it a toy in his mind, and at his will he could and had moved all within to suit his fancy. But once down the grade he would lose it and not see it again until after the bend-

ing and the rise and fall of the pike, when suddenly he would come down upon it actually, a house with a dwelling's proper proportions. He never looked then. He drove by, with his gaze upon the pike and feeling the reins in his hands moving with the ease of a slow piston. But that was behind him now. Soon he would be able to turn in at the gate, look steadily at what was his, throw the lines to the boy, say, "Son, take the buggy around and unhitch."

"The land down there looks skinned, don't it?" Saul said. "And yet we're not so high as all that, to see it so."

He did not answer at once, and then he said, "I keep to the pike. And they come to me by the pike. That's the way to do business for a profit. Never talk to a man in the fields or in his house about business. It's always a coming up to judgment with me. If I considered a man's needs from his need, I'd end up bankrupt. Nor would he thank me for it."

"But going up and down the pike. Aint it kind a lonesome?"

"I go. I do my business. I return. You have to choose."

Nemmind

What your mammy say
Kick your little foots
and fly away

Listen at him. I reckon he thinks them mules will fly him to Texas, and the wagon too. The old baldhead turkey buzzard. The wagon might fly. It's light enough. Go ahead. Show everybody from here to Texas what little gear you got. Let them take note the way a body can ride along, with no more care than to bind his spokes with baling wire. And that guitar laying on the feather bed as proud as evil doing. If they are a mind to ask whur your woman is, tell them how she's picking the crop you left in the fields, to give the man his sheer for rent and fertilize. When it's asked whur you've cropped before, tell about the time you let the grass take it and folks raised a flag in the field, and you with no more git-up than to set on the porch and not take it down. And if they are of a mind to ask how come you left home,

Speak out. Tell how contrary the weather is at home, and you after that Texas weather will plant a crop, chop and pick it too. You'll undertake to sell it.

I'm going. You a-coming?

No. I aint a-coming. I've lived on every farm in this country and now we've a roof don't leak and a house sets fair out of the wind, I'll stay and be dry for a spell.

They got women in Texas. Git up, mule.

You, Asa. You self-appointed son of a bitch. You wait. You wait til I dig up my rambler rose. You sold my cow, but I'll take my rambler it's the last thing I do.

Make haste then. You already thowed me late.

The horse bracing its steps, the shafts lifted against the harness as the buggy rolled slowly downgrade, winding through the cedar brake towards the cut where the wild-grape vines, looping, made a green tunnel. Pete and Saul unmoving moved with the turning wheels towards its shaggy mouth, agape upon the rotting limestone, chipped like Indian discs, jagging their edges into the tunnel's throat. There light shifted its shadows upon a denser air. The pike lay in this tunnel like a floor. Over it the voice walked high and clear . . .

I gave my love a ring that has no end

"Answer a riddle and it asks another," Saul said.

"The woman is singing a love song," he replied.

They both looked towards the cabin from which the voice was coming. It could not be seen for the trees. Saul said, "Travel as he will, a man is always circling about his predicament."

"A man must stand up, Slowns. Sight with the eye. That brings him the shortest way through. In love or anything else."

"Stand him straight as a pine, Big Pete, a man still bends to the horizon. Lose him in the mass of an army, he makes an arc of his feet. And though an army goes forward and back, on that one-two beat it pounds out a rhythm that will finally walk into his head, and even the longest march comes to a halt. Then no matter how

flat he has beat it, his mind fills up, for emptiness I believe you said is what a man can't stand. And when it's all over, he rings up where he began. Or if it's not over, but he's in an outfit occupying the enemy town, there's a man for you looking two ways at once, with eyes running in opposite directions to meet bang up in a blindness that's called the world's travel, for no matter how big the town or the occupying force it all comes down to one house and one man."

"Then let him move in. It's a shelter he knows."

Saul said quickly, "The soldier boy's not dressed right."

The horse pricked its ears as they broached the vine-covered way. Draped at the entrance, the heat's shadow shimmered like a ghost leaving water. Their eyes plunged through to reach the depths within. The buggy rolled into the tunnel. Pete took a deep breath and spat. But the taste was still in his mouth. Who would think a shadow had a taste? Below, when they came out, it would be only half a mile and the road would pass her house. This time he would turn; he would look. His heart began it, the slow steady ringing.

I'm running fast as a bird almost, but birds don't need shoes. I can make it. Pappy'll forgit it. I will name it again. He'll have to unbutton the gate. Or he'll disremember those with the red toes and buttons plumb to the top. *I'll walk into meeting and the buttons will shine like white berries, and everybody will look, but I will not look. I will set my foot forward for the washing and the shoe toe so red and his hand will trimble* oh the dust is hot among my toes, but I'll make it, pappy's just pulling up at the gate, he'll wrop the lines before he swings down, pappy is ever careful of his team, and that buggy tolling the horses he will have to let by. A whole bale I picked he'll keep to his promise, *oh then and then he'll think it's pearls I've got in my hands, so slick his hands will slip, oh it will make him long at the unbuttoning* that buggy's pulling up. It is hailing pappy but I better not slack up . . . oh, oh, it's Mister Legrand.

"You're headed the wrong way, Pennyweather," Pete Legrand said.

"Yes, sir, Mister Legrand. I thought I'd take this bale to the town gin. The women needing shoes and we're out of coffee." He examined the sky slowly, stubbornly. "It's a-fixing up to rain." The man, in angry shame now looked directly at him. "The town gin is closeter than yourn."

"Who gave you the money to make your crop? Me or Semmes?"

He waited while Pennyweather swallowed and looked around at the ground and spat, and then he said, "The town gin's a heap closeter."

"It was just as close when you borrowed the money."

"We needing a few things."

"I need that bale you owe me."

"I aim to pay ye. There's more'n a bale in the field."

"It's not picked. And look at that cloud."

He did not look up, nor at Pete Legrand, but between the off mule's ears. "I aim to pay."

"You will pay today. You take that bale to my gin. I'll inform Semmes, if he buys it, he'll be liable. And remember this, Pennyweather. The hand that gives is above the hand that receives." He turned back to the pike. There was the silence. He said, "Go on, madam."

The horse moved off slowly and he flicked it with the whip. The buggy jerked and then the pace grew even. Beyond the woods there was her house, he must hurry, hurry to town and get this business done. Time, he would waste no more of it.

"Big Pete," Slowns said.

"Yes, yes."

"Where does the hand of love lie?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You just gave to that poor bastard back there a lecture on hands. I guess because you didn't want to get on the subject of shoes, that half-grown barefooted girl might not have listened so well."

"I spoke of a just debt," he said stiffly.

"But hands. Where does a loving hand lie?"

"Where I put it," he said abruptly.

The Wake

Where the coffin, Miss Jule?

and she said, her voice between lips and teeth, autonomous there, not her voice nor her breath, the gears now to lungs heart and mind all unhinged by that body on their bed—You know, on the ell porch, near the kitchen door

She said

and could feel the solid bulk of Uncle Peter at the threshold. It was as if he had brought twilight into the already shady chamber, close up against the bed, where the white sheet rising at the middle held the shadows at bay . . . could only feel the black sawyer; she had no need to look: the threat lay now outside. Slices of sun quivered between the green slats; made a ladder of the blinds, and the heat climbed with the sound of bees swarming. She walked over and pulled to the blinds a little tighter, but she saw it was no use. At the cracks along the clumsy shutters she could smell the sun seeping into the chamber, probing . . . it smelt of bee bread in a rifled hive.

Nome, he said. Taint there.

Not on the ell porch?

Nome.

She thought, coming back towards the bed: Do I have to manage everything? Keep everything in my head from the four seasons to a coupling pin . . . Can't I take time even to grieve, or worse than grieve?

She spoke calmly—You can't just misplace a coffin.

Nome.

It's not a snuffbox.

Yes'm, he said.

Yes, ma'm. I'm going to cut me that big cherry down by the branch and make my coffin, husband said when husband was new. And she could see in his eyes the question in hers, looking up from the baby smacking at her breast. Oh, I'm not studying any present need for it, he said. I don't mean to break a filly for another to ride. And their eyes danced together, hers brighter for the hot flush of the cheeks, the confusion which made her drop them to the nursing baby. Filly? she said. He threw his head back in that way only of his, the laughter rolling out and filling the room as he came over; stood beside them a moment and tenderly put his hand on Lucius's bald head. Careful, she said. Quietly he spoke, I like things done in a seemly way. I might die in a press of work. I would not want to surprise you, have you rush about and knock down the chicken house to find planks to bury me. And she had said, Husband, hush, the still bright word robbed suddenly of its shine. He stood for a while watching the baby suck; and then out of a brown study, quizzically smiling, he reached over and with his finger flipped the nipple out of its mouth. Its little feelings hurt, its little red face, its lusty bawling. An't you ashamed, she said, picking on my child, and gave the child again the breast and its darling little sweet mouth nuzzled and guzzled, the little fingers sunk in her roundness. Shamefaced, he grinned and said, That little snapping turtle thinks life is all teaty. You get out of here, she said. Go make your coffin and let Lucius alone.

Lucius, my child.

Why don't he come?

Her heart lunging—"Are you sure he's being fetched?"

"Yes'm. Lack I tole you. Mister Leatherbury he gone. He taken mules to ride them down."

"But suppose he can't find them?"

And she felt the fright of what could happen, Lucius beyond her care, this fright of distance and her helplessness before it, this distance towards which all things sped. Only under her eye were things safe.

"Julie, child. Don't you fret."

"I can't help it, Aunt Nanny." She turned to the old voice quavering, like cloth ripping unevenly. Her eyes sought her aunt's eyes, skipping, bumping the bed, to the headboard where the old woman sat. "He's so far from home," she said.

"Sol Leatherbury," the old voice went on, "can't find his way from the kitchen door to slop the hogs. Put him in the woods now and a hant could not hide from him."

The voice jerked like a rusty gear, came to a wheezy stop. She waited for it to resume, to drown the quiet. But her ancient kinswoman leaned towards the bed, her turkey wing fanning the quiet, and as she fanned, the quiet thickened over the bloating linen. Behind her she could feel Uncle Peter still blocking the threshold. Must they ever be about, these decrepit harbingers who had that morning brought the body home

a few hours ago but now a lifetime away

She had only stepped upon the verandah to see if the pickers had started across the road, early because there was no dew, the sky hanging above its oppressive weight of inevitability, as a change in weather, and there they were in the driveway, the old ones, threading the cedars, the spring wagon rolling with the dry crunch of the wheels, the blooded horse all in a lather, straining against the lines, prancing slightly. Its eyes wide and its nostrils flaring as if it knew. With what distinctness she saw this! Uncle Peter crowding the high narrow seat but leaning formally away from the slight figure so strangely familiar. What brings her so early to this house, with a bunch of autumn flowers in her lap? What is her haste that she still holds the shears with which she clipped them? And then under the bonnet she knew her, her ancient kinswoman; knew what lay behind as if flung into the wagon bed, the riddle now usurping the marriage bed

lying neither on her side nor his but exactly in the middle.

That was the usurpation. She must get them out so she could think. She turned, "Uncle Peter, would you like . . .?"

The aging black man stepped noiselessly into the room. He came

to a stop just short of the bed. He stood back as if he feared to soil it, looking down the air. Then it seemed to her it was his stare which so misplaced the figure under the sheet; gave to its features that iron disdain. And then she smelt him. Stepping back, she stepped into Aunt Nanny's gaze neither apprehensive nor with sympathy, not even in speculation, merely blank, no, no, the odor bred itself, she was growing giddy . . .

"How many hams you wants to soak, Mistiss?"

The cook's voice turned her about. She righted herself, "Oh, Della," she said and began to walk towards her, scattering her words, "Uncle Peter, will you step out to the smokehouse with me?"

She could feel him tiptoeing and then she heard it, the iron ties crunching the gravel of the drive, as if suddenly the sound had settled out of the air to roll into the earth's brake—and then the silence. She quickened her steps; her eyes leaped before her; the voice, rapid with relief, seemed far behind, "Lucius is home."

They left old Nanny who stepped down and married Mister Tilford with the body. You step down, now, and you see better. Now I can take my farewell look. A body don't keep and the sun strong out of season. A man was ever a morning's favor, always a-wanting in, but they don't stay. They come at you like a battering billy and crawl back like a worm. Oh, they can be full of promise in their prime. Each time you think he'll stay this time, but it aint no time. And when they big you, you say he'll tarry with the man child you tote. For sure now, your belly tight as a drum and the child wallowing as natural as a fish in a pond. And when it kicks and thumps agen your heart it's for all the world like it knowed its home and aimed to stay. But it wants out, and out it goes. Its daddy's done showed the way, nigh busting you open, killing you maybe . . .

But you'll stay this time, Joe Cree, do they find that cherry box. You'll stay put, they find it or not. Now you will, with that steady look all tangled in branches and falling leaves. The yel-

low leaf. It more suits for me than you. The last look, and it choked with the tree's droppings. There's a riddle, to fall so light and bright and lie so heavy. The last look. Not what you've loved but what all comes to. It wears better than love. But it's a long look to look and not see. These silver dollars will give you ease. Your Cousin Nanny taken thought to bring the corpse money.

Aye, what a wail. Double love. Double trouble.

Lucius come in.

Waily, waily. It gives ease too.

Waily, Julie. It brings ease.

That wail . . . Jack could not get it out of his head. It swelled as in some seashell under water, deep down. It moved deep within him, as some tide in the sea's bottom, unseen, uncharted, yet always there below. It made him hesitate on his way to Julia. He paused in the passageway between her chamber and the little dressing room where she spent so much of her time. Yes, he had penetrated all the levels of the deep. He feared now that the stress of that cry would show in her features: and he would have to name what he saw there. He straightened himself; he took a few steps and stopped like an eavesdropper. The door was ajar and he saw Julia framed for his sight, seated in all the clutter of her domesticity. Stilled yet alert, he seemed to himself eyes and ears hung to a shadow.

But the true shadow was behind him, returned to that body on the bed, sucked into its stillness, never more to be cast before or behind, invisible but there with Joe Cree's husk, in the house Joe Cree had built for his bride but had never finished. Fraternal war had stopped the work. It had never been resumed. He took this in now with such clarity: the upstairs a shell, the great rooms below unplastered, the skeletal walls a constant commentary on the handsome solid furniture. It looked forever unused. How the columns outside, the cool verandah masked this incompleteness within. So this house had stood against the day that had never come, for Joe Cree would

finish it right or not at all, who must have seen it as himself lasting in the brick, the future forecaught in the dwelling that would house his heir. This was Joe's hope and purpose. But hope is not enough. The corpse on the bed was proof of that.

Out of time, what time it told! It was Jack's sense of this which gave him the shock of a fresh view of Julia, waiting beyond the half-opened door. She seemed to wait. He had come off the hot turnpike with another image of her in his mind, that half dream, half revery of her as a girl and he and his brothers acting the crucial scenes of their predicament. But that sister was not this sister. He saw before him now a full-blown woman. He took this in with all its meaning. Oh, the protean shape of love! Where to take hold. Could he, with the wail and her arms clasped about Lucius, there in the gloom of the hall, the boy intense in the embrace, taller than his mother, so that clasping him she seemed to hang, all helpless, in his arms.

there was nothing helpless about her now

She sat in the low chair they all knew so well, not touching its back, sinking slightly beneath the weight of herself into the cushioned bottom, with that unconscious show of composure which the familiar retreat can give. Here in this room there was no sway but hers. This was the impression he got above all. It showed best in her eyes. The limpid light of youth was gone, that light he had traveled by. They were now a deep azure, and they opened wide, two brimming pools, to receive what was before them. Or rather he got the sense, for Lucius was there, masked by the door although nothing could mask the sense of his presence—that sense that the boy was already sinking, and only his voice was left murmuring in the room, his words fading into the monotone of his voice. The boy at last raised it in desperation. "But, mama, how could he walk under a falling tree?"

Her body gave a slight start, as if some invisible cord had snapped.

She did not answer at once, and then, "What is it, son, you are trying to say?"

"It's . . . there's something wrong. It's not like papa to be so careless."

Her shoulders lifted; they fell as in a sigh; but she made no sound.

"Isn't it enough, son, I have to bear this day but that you bring me more?"

"Oh, mama."

His shame brought him forward into view. His face was full of color; his arms lifted slightly then fell again. He didn't seem to know where to look. Quietly, sure they would not notice, Jack pushed the door open a few more inches. In the seconds it had taken him they had shifted their positions. Julia was now in profile. Her shoulders drooped slightly, bending her arm in a downward flow. It was all a natural gesture but the effect was of such subtlety. Her hands, one in the other, made a small bowl in her lap. The silence seemed to rise from the cupped hands, lazily spiraling around them both. Lucius lifted his head in appeal. "It's just that, mama. I'm trying to save you more."

"You go about it, then, in a strange way. With your suggestion of unthinkable things."

"But papa had such hopes of the timber."

"I know." A shade of abuse came into her voice. She paused to make sure he took this in. "Your papa was visionary."

"Oh, but it was this . . ."

"His recklessness?"

"No'm. He was only bold. I know what he risked. He didn't want you to know. He didn't want to worry you."

She beckoned him to her, but he pretended not to see; and then she parried, "You think I don't know?" Her tone was that of an understanding between two adults, of the restraint of suffering, of forbearance.

Lucius looked down as if he needed time to take this in, and with his head still bowed, his voice low and puzzled, "You mean you knew what he risked?"

"What he risked?" Her voice came full and resonant. "How could I not know? I wonder if he knew so well, or cared?"

This brought Lucius up, but he explored no further than his

surprise. "You mean you knew what he staked? That it was everything?"

Now it was she who seemed to hesitate. She looked at her hands upon her lap, at the gold wedding ring. She turned it on her finger, slowly. The sun in bars flared; the gold band glowed dully. The pause was filled with some mystery it withheld, of her hesitancy before a decision rare and final. Then the sun withdrew, and the racing shadow swept the rug at their feet. Her hands, apart, made the slight gesture of a decision reached. "Everything," she said.

"Everything?" he repeated.

She bowed. Oh, with what supple grace, with just the restraint in its giving, did her neck bend. Lucius did not see it. He could see nothing but her mouth as the words, "He gave the excuse of the timber for wandering away. Whatever the excuse, did that make me any the less abandoned?"

"Oh, not abandoned, mama!"

"I've had practice for my weeds."

She brought her hands to her face. Lucius was at her knees. "I'll take care of you," he said. "You know that, don't you."

She quickly recovered herself. Such depths of knowledge looked down upon him. "You will have your own life. Some day a wife."

"But what has that to do with it?" His voice was full, almost angry, at her lack of understanding.

"No," she said. "The farm is too involved. I won't let you throw your youth away. On it or me."

"Papa only wanted to make it better for us. I'll do what he would want me to do."

"How?" she asked, and in the word were insuperable obstacles.

"I have such plans . . ." And then he saw her tears. He put his head into her lap to hide his own. She stroked his hair absently. Absently her voice matched the rhythm of her strokes, "At first I didn't miss him so much. The farm filled my days, but even in the busiest season there was a hollow that gnawed. I grew to know, to love the care of the farm, but this only showed me how deprived I was." Her voice was full; yet it remained steady. "And then the

nights. Alone, in an unfinished house. How close the night lamp brought the darkness." She lifted her hands and dropped them. "And then he took you away."

"It was for me to learn."

"It might have been you who was killed."

The force of her tone made Lucius sit up.

"Was it for that," he asked; he was whispering, "you quarreled?"

"Quarreled?" She seemed to be trying to remember.

"About taking me from you." His voice was barely audible.

"Did we quarrel?"

"You were not the same together. I felt . . ." What he felt brought him slowly to his feet and slowly away towards the north window.

"He took you to the woods," she said harshly. Her voice looped the space between them. It caught him and he stopped. She waited, alert, watching his back. She watched it as if the distance it put between them was more than she could bear. Then recklessly she said the words that must bring him back. "I know what the woods can do. My brothers took me there as a little girl."

Jack could not believe she would let herself go so far. And then her body, relaxing, told him Lucius was turning with his question.

"Was it the woods?" There was all the boy's need to know in the directness of the question.

She gave him no answer. She merely gazed, to know she had him back.

He blurted out, "Was it my fault?"

"Yours?"

As if only now just understanding the true direction they were taking, she stood in alarm.

"I've felt it," he said more quietly.

Jack saw he could delay no longer. He pushed open the shielding door. "Well, where is the coffin?" He asked brusquely.

"Coffin?"

They gasped as clumsy swimmers submerged find air.

"You know, that tight six-foot box that's never tight enough."

Jack threw open the blinds. The light leaped at the room, and the heat in its wash. "You can see by this there's need for haste." He waited for his words to make their effect, until he began to feel he had waited too long. He felt a sudden shyness, a reluctance to meet their stare.

Outside the sun was free of the clouds, and the green scum on the pond in the barn lot lay sodden before the brightness of its shine. Upon the pond's rim the old belted sow was lying in the mud, grunting full and soft. Jack closed the blinds with a weak hand, closed his eyes. Out of the dark well the balm of words began to rise. "The dog days. All the passion of fecund summer comes to such a day. A green scum, a fever on the waters. That pause between plowing time and gathering time, as if nature had slapped a poultice to draw the poison, that the harvest be sweet. But beware the pause." He slowly paced the room. Julia had resumed her seat and was regarding him steadily. He raised his hand and voice. "Beware the pause. When the creeks run sick and the swimmer gets sores. For the fever carries. It's a time to let nature alone. And what of a year, this year, when the crop even falls in the dog days? Find that in the almanac if you can, or take to bed and draw the covers up and pray for winter."

He stopped now, between them but at a distance. They made three points of a triangle, as invisibly the silence drew the sides and drew Lucius's gaze and Julia's to him, the apex. In that instant of fixity, bound by the law of angles, he saw he had to choose where no choice was. He met his sister's eyes. They did not waver. There was only their bottomless azure depths. His own began to swim . . .

"You must be drunk, Uncle Jack," Lucius said. His voice cut the room in two.

In that instant swelling to prolong itself Jack found himself trying to interpret what he had heard; but he only felt the shock of what he saw. Lucius's eyes were almost closed, but under the lids he saw, fairly glittering, a look meant only for him.

That look—to let it grow in all the interpretation implicit in it—he knew would bring them both, and not only them, upon the

brink of the abyss. They were at the brink, but not yet teetering, when the knock came. It saved them; it postponed by diversion, that old palliative of surrounding the object, the diffusion which saves us all from the shock of crises neither the body nor spirit can bear. There must be time to heal the rent, to let the scar toughen as crisis mounts to crisis. It was Dickie, in his true character of healer, who made it. Not the medicine man, not the pill toter, but the maimed comforter. What if his caduceus was a walking stick? By its support he thumped in on his peg leg, followed by Winston and Skaggs and Semmes of Joe's old company, to tell them death was not just a family matter. Joe's friends filed in like soldiers long familiar with such matters. They stood in line as if at command.

Nothing showed in Julia's face of the scene just past. She received them, not rising from her chair but seated in the full sovereignty of her sorrow, making of this show of their intimacy with the house the restraint which could make her sorrow and theirs bearable. Suddenly her beauty in this mold of sorrow seemed all waste. Joe's friends blinked and stared, as if they had not expected to find her here. In her presence, all together, even at the same moment, they saw how they were parodying their youth. Winston became aware of his paunch and surreptitiously tried to button his coat. Skaggs stood more erect, but his shoulders by this only showed the more their droop. Semmes's clean linen seemed an offense. They shifted their feet in a kind of panic, and then she addressed them. As she quietly thanked them, the room which had seemed overcrowded assumed its common proportions. Then Winston, "Don't you worry, Miss Jule. We'll take care of everything."

The old words of comfort which say everything and say nothing before the brute fact, but which allow for the act as if it were just another act. Only Lucius paled when his mother told him to take his father's friends and show them where the grave must be dug. Without a word the boy held the door, looking straight before him, as if his sight were straining beyond him, as if somewhere in the air he would find the support outside himself upon which to lean. Without a word the men followed. There was a fumbling movement; they bowed, so slightly they seemed only to nod and then left

the room separately, their black hats hanging loosely against their legs. Jack watched them fade from view in the passageway. Suddenly he felt an exposure. Lucius had left the door open. He went over and pushed it to; heard the lock click against the infected air, knowing he had only shut it out for a while. But in the little sewing room he felt the privacy the family needs as it withdraws from the crisis that has brought it together. It was an older privacy they felt. Joe's death had returned Julia to her brothers. Even Lucius seemed alien now. . . .

"How like that picture of mama you look, sister," Dickie said.

She dropped her head and covered her face with her hands. She wept hard and briefly; then felt in her bosom for a handkerchief. Dickie made loud angry thumps as he brought her a piece of mending. As she wiped her eyes, she showed nothing hidden, nothing guarded. In the room now each face showed the naked repose of being alone; there was no sense of aloneness. Dickie sat near her on the ottoman and he, Jack, upon the daybed. "Mind," she said to him, "you'll rumple that dress." Jack half rose and pulled it from under him. It took him effort, so heavily had his body responded to the repose the bed offered. She folded it methodically and tossed it to the sewing table.

"That was good of them to come," she said.

"I rode out from town with them," Dickie said. "Everybody seemed shocked. Joe was the balance wheel in this county."

There was silence now in the room, but it was not this which Jack felt. It was that old timeless communion of the family, its special language which scarcely needed but sometimes used the common speech. His flesh was one full sigh of contentment. The strain of the last few days was working out of him like sweat. He felt a great longing for sleep, to stretch out on the daybed and sleep and wake and find them here, with the door forever shut, never to open upon what claimed them beyond it. He became aware of the scent of orris root and of Julia afresh. He would have to send for fresh clothes. The long climb up the Peaks, the sun had wrung him dry as a dishrag and his clothes as sour from the whiskey and the

purging, and that itchy clammy bottom to his feet, and his boots rubbing like a bad conscience. He pushed himself up against the wall, "Well. Joe's mishap has brought us all together again. The world sloughed off like proud flesh. A few pieces missing. Dickie's shy a leg. Julia short a husband, and I've give up hunting my virginity."

"Oh, Brother Jack," Julia said and Dickie frowned.

And then they gave in to the silent shaking laughter, and all the muscles in his belly Jack felt to slacken in comfort and release.

"Hush," Julia said.

And Jack, "The old blood measures the same. Out of the old family recipe. We might swap it pint by pint and the heart never miss a beat."

After this they all sat a long while without speaking, sometimes looking towards the blinds, where the sun withdrew; or a shadow like a hawk swooped, darkening the room. Suddenly Julia said, "I must see about soaking those hams."

"I wouldn't do that," Dickie said. "There won't be time."

"Of course not. What was I thinking?" she said.

"There it is again," Jack said, almost angry. "Time. Can't we let it alone? Let it do its work without hiring out to it?"

"But there's so much to see to, Brother Jack." And then as if to herself, "I wish I knew how many people there'll be to feed."

She sat with that alert inward look of the good housekeeper, sorting in her mind the things to be done. And in this sorting, Jack felt as a mystery, how the very occasion for it was lost in the intricacies of her domestic economy. Her hands unconsciously went to the pocket where she kept her keys. She looked up startled, and her eyes darted between them. "My keys! Now where did I put them."

She was on her feet, looking here, flustered and yet with rapid movements about the little room. She lifted the mending from off the sewing table, and soon Dickie was following her about. She turned on him sharply, "Don't follow. Look." And then, "Get up, Jack. Maybe you are sitting on them."

He lumbered to his feet. "Flood, fire, drought or death, a woman reaches for her keys."

"If I don't find them," she said.

"And so it will be on the last day, with the trumpeting and coming up to judgment. There'll be one sound to drown all others, that rattle of keys and the women busy fixing up a snack to keep up the strength of some poor damned soul."

"This is no time for talk, Jack Croleigh. I've got to find those keys, or I don't know what we will do."

"Break the locks on the storeroom," he said. "You won't have anything left in them this time tomorrow night anyway."

"Jack." She stopped and looked at him. "Will you hush."

At that moment Jack again felt the exposure, the chilling draught in its return, and instantaneously the words, "And the coffin, mama, is that lost too?"

Lucius was standing just inside the door. Jack's first impression was that he had never left, until he saw the change that had come over the boy. He had come back to them with a fresh awareness of himself. There had been no reproof in his question. It was quietly put, and he waited with a slight frown at his brows, in no way conscious that he showed the right to ask questions and have them answered.

An angry flush darkened his mother's neck, blooding her cheeks. She replied, "Go ask your Cousin Charles."

He seemed not to take this in. "But, mama, it's very strange. The apples were always brought to the house. How could anybody think to take the coffin off the porch?"

"You know your Cousin Charles always gathers the apples. Go to him."

Her voice was barely audible, as if she had received a deserved reproof. Unwillingly and with anger at the boy he saw the blood in her cheeks and neck was still there. It seemed suddenly the color of guilt. Lucius had not moved, nor had the rest of them changed their postures. The silence seemed to separate and confine them where

they were. Jack dropped his eyes, and there against his boots lay an apron and showing through the pocket the household keys.

He quickly took them. "Here, sister."

"Oh, where did you find them?" And then distractedly, "I must go to the kitchen," and with a quick tread walked out of the room, her neck a little forward, her eyes on a downward slant. She took no notice of her son as she passed him. He looked at his uncles as if for an explanation. "Go, do what she said," Dickie told him. "You know how absent-minded Charlie is. He's misplaced it somewhere."

And Jack, "You'll find it somewhere in the dead wood of all those genealogical trees. But sprinkle yourself with toilet water and stuff cotton up your nose. The air is thick and noxious there."

"There's need of haste, Lucius," Dickie said.

"Yessir," the boy replied.

This time as he left he shut the door.

"The remarkable thing," Dickie said, "is the way she goes on at a time like this, as if everything, liens and notes, the weather even, is some kind of child's play which when it's gone too far, she will set to rights, just as soon as she can take time from what really matters, such as giving out the food or finding dust under the table. . . ." He paused and looked at Jack. "You know Joe is ruined. His property will go under the hammer."

"No," Jack said, drawing himself up on the couch. "No, I didn't know it was that bad."

"It's worse than that. He went a good many notes. These properties will go down, too. There's no telling where it will end. As long as he was alive, his skill in business, his name and influence kept things tossing like balls in the air. It was a precarious timing, but he kept it. The irony is that if he had lived to cut the timber, everything would have been all right maybe."

"If he had lived," Jack repeated slowly. "If. The word which should have begun the gospel that never got written. It didn't have to be, for it's told every hour of the day. Try it to any scale and it sings the same old song, Paradise lost and the world gained. It's the chord for every fact, and the fact is Joe Cree killed himself."

"Jack!"

"Well. Say then somebody told Joe something he didn't need to know and it upset him so he didn't watch where he was going."

"Joe," Dickie said stubbornly, "was not a man to kill himself."

"No. Nor is any man, but men have been known to do it."

"Joe was a man of honor."

Jack looked at his brother with compassion. He saw the sweat glisten upon his forehead. He said more gently, "So he was. And honor is a code that works so long as everybody agrees to the rules. It's got teeth in it. It's why even in a democracy it works now and then, for the man of honor backs it with his life. He says I will live only on such terms, and if you don't meet them, I will call you out. But can you call out a past action? And who else is there?"

"Me," Dickie said but only his lips moved.

Slowly Jack shook his head. "And make an open scandal. Confess to the world you have been tricked by your wife's kin? And ruin Lucius, not only whom he loved but who is also defenseless. And how can a man outright, after eighteen years, believe his son is not his son? With his mind maybe, but not the heart. And that's where the code breaks down, for honor needs a clean and shining light. Is it not vindicated always at the break of day, just when the dark is sped? Tell me this. Which dies at night to be renewed at dawn, the head or the heart? And tell me this, which killed Joe Cree, honor or love?"

"I thought it for the best," Dickie said. "What I did. I was trying to save Julia from our failure to look after her. I took the chance Joe would never find out about Legrand. But I didn't look for this." He let his words drift away and then he looked at Jack with alarm. "Whoever told Joe . . ."

"Might tell again." Jack took it up. "That's the burden Joe has bequeathed to us. It might salve your conscience some."

"To know that we must share?"

"To know that we have it all now."

There was a light thump at the window. Both brothers turned to see a bee falling back from the glass. Outside a swarm of bees was

cutting the air into streamers, and then several in succession hit the panes angrily. Jack said, "Somebody forgot to tell the bees."

Dickie got up and hobbled to the window. Suddenly as they had come, the bees left, and then he spoke, "Maybe Joe's last thoughts were not all of honor," and in his voice was all the fullness of a resolution not to flinch or look away. "We must save them, Julia and Lucius."

"First we must bury the dead," Jack said and left his brother alone in the sewing room.

In the portico which joined the office to the house Jack saw his man, John Greer. He was leaning against one of the small square posts. His shoulder seemed to be holding it in place; and yet so inert his body, so effortless his repose, he seemed a shadow forever fixed. Instinctively Jack glanced at the declining sun, and then John was coming towards him in his brisk, mannerly way. He wondered how long he had been waiting to speak to him.

"Everything all right at home?"

"I had to drench the blue mule."

"Just let me go away from home . . ."

"He'll make it," John said.

They stood there, and he became aware in the off-glance with which John saw him of what an offense he must have been in Julia's little sitting room. He said, "You better fetch me some fresh clothes."

"They in the office."

"Well, if there's nothing else pressing, I'll go change."

"Amon come for his cotton-picking money."

"He owes me most of that."

"Yessir. He out of bread."

"You tell him for me he'll always be out of bread trying to keep up two women."

John waited; then, "I drawed you a bucket of water."

"You want to wash me, too?"

"You plenty able to do that for yourself."

They looked at each other. Neither of them smiled. "All right,"

Jack said. "Weigh him up a barrel of corn—no, you'd better make it a bushel of wheat; we'll need all our corn to feed. And give him a dollar and tell him I'll see him. But I don't see why . . ."

"Those chillurn got to eat."

"I don't see why it's up to me to feed two families because you didn't have any better sense than to let your sister tie up with a nigger like Amon."

"I didn't have nothing to do with it."

"Neither did I, but then she's not my sister."

"Maybe I aint got the right words for womenfolks. Maybe next time you'll gie me the word natured enough for a woman to hear."

Jack looked sharply but met only the bland round face. "Well, I'll go clean up," but he delayed, for John was lingering exactly as he did when he considered one of his orders either foolish or impossible to carry out. He stood a little way off, respectfully, with that perfect decorum he never lost and by means of which he said and did whatever he pleased, except that today the smile was missing from his yellow round face. The muddy eyeballs looked at him and looked away. "All right," Jack said. "I see there is something that doesn't please you about the preparations here. But it won't do you any good. It's not my funeral. When I die, you can wash and shroud me, dig the grave, except you'll be too busy picking the mourners to perform that little office. But you can't run this funeral. You might get around Sis Jule, but you won't get around Rhears. Why aint he at the house?"

"He keeping time and weighing up the cotton."

"This is no time for that."

"Yessir. Miss Jule sont word for him to stay there until they picked out. With everybody picking one crop before they goes on to the next, Rhears the onliest one can keep the time straight."

This was all very strange, at such a time. It disclosed a thing too distraught. If he could only fit it all together . . . he said, "I guess you carried the word."

"Miss Jule told me to stop by and tell him on my way to ast Mister Suds would he come barbecue the beef for her."

"What Cousin Suds say?"

"He awful sorry about her trouble. He be glad to help anyways he can."

"Usually people stop for a funeral, but if they an't going to do it here, you'd better make yourself useful."

"Aint enough wood to barbecue a chicken."

"Rustle up some then."

John looked at the sky and studied it carefully, and then he let the words drop, "That box, it setting under the old winesap."

So this was what he had been waiting to say. In the silence Jack felt the chasm which underlay their life together. He knew at once how far John's loyalty had been strained to tell him this. With Rhears away in the fields, it would fall to his lot to bring the coffin in. It was not a duty he would want to perform. He would require specific directions; he would be the instrument but he would take no responsibility whatever in the matter. As if to make concrete Jack's thoughts, the servant said, "That box knowed his time warn't due."

"Anyway, you better bring it to the house."

"What with?"

"The spring wagon."

"That box half full of apples."

"What of it?"

"I can't lif it."

"Dump the apples, then."

"And let the hogs eat them?"

"Listen, that coffin is long overdue. You get Rhears, tell him I say to take time off from the cotton and help you bring it in. It's his job anyway."

John bowed his head, nodding to the words; and he knew he would feel better about it taking Rhears with him. Jack watched him slowly take off, barely pausing to say, "I brought you a jug."

"You'll be rewarded hereafter. Where'd you put it?"

He cut his eyes slyly around, "In the slop jar in the office."

Then all full of business he walked away.

And Jack turned into the office, thinking how that coffin was always turning up to bother people. That flush of anger turn to . . . was it guilt, on Julia's face? What made him think of guilt, when at most Julia could only blame herself for negligence. How could she blame herself even for that? Sooner or later everything on a farm will be put to use. There are never enough tools or hands in certain seasons. Never enough storeroom. It was natural that in the press of work, when all the cotton had opened at once and every sack in use, somebody would take the box to the tree and there load it. He felt a slight shiver at his spine,

he had stripped his clothes but it was not the early evening air, he knew, that made him shiver. He poured the water in the bowl on the hearth. The strong cleansing smell of a dead fireplace cleared his head and he began washing rapidly. He dried briskly, and the effort brought fresh sweat all over his body, and he wiped again. He picked up his dirty clothes and dropped them gingerly in the corner, as if the very touch might now contaminate him. Their foulness was stifling and the window was stuck, but he could not open the door, as he must have privacy, in his person and to think. He could at least empty the dirty water into the slop jar. He stood for a moment, looking down and over the brimming bowl, the faint odor of soap and the body's waste rising to his nostrils. The jar's top, he saw, was chipped and faded, but the design clear: painted roses among the painted leaves, the handle one full-blown blossom upraised out of three perfect leaves. "Here's an artist with a vision," he said to hear the sound of his voice. "Love's old sweet song. Every petal a perfection and open to eye and hand. And abominations beneath."

He clasped the hard china top and lifted it. There was the jug and he had forgotten and almost deluged it with his filth. Now why had he put it in the slop jar? To hide it maybe, but that sly look of his. No, John had put it there to remind him of their common frailty, in this way to redress the inequalities of the world. Well, John was always putting him in his place. That was why he was such a good servant. He took the whiskey out and emptied the slop and clattered the china top back in place.

"That's more like it," he said.

Feeling pure and light and almost gay he dressed; took a small drink and sat down. The drink went quickly to his head. All the heaviness there dissolved, and for the moment he felt his flesh purified by the washing he had given it, his skin sparkling with blood, and beneath—was that its location? He felt no call to probe this wonderful feeling of repose; it seemed to have nothing to do with his body proper but was of an essence rather of bone and muscle fitted so snugly to the chair. Nowhere could he feel the wood touch or pinch. And then it came as a mystery revealed, how common water on the common flesh may wash also the spirit clean, make whole again, renew hope in all men's acts, wise and foolish, good and bad.

the chair pinched, and he shifted his weight.

But no act resolves itself of itself. There's the will, the imagination, and the risk. Else are we lifted and set down as idly as summer dust. Now that he was alone, his head clear, he would pick up the threads, for who else was there to do it. Unravel the past: weave the present. To what pattern? A pattern to keep Lucius from being undone by the knowledge this fresh death will bring up, for open the ground as you will the WAS jumps up as the NOW goes in and no time for the amenities. In and out, the two motions which make a whole but never are a whole. The old curse, division's sorrow, Duncan had tried to deny. Duncan and Beverly, each in his way. And where had it brought them all? Into the folded cove after the long hunt, to the spongy sod and rock, and like babes in the wood Julia sleeping in Pete Legrand's arms . . .

this unraveling—he must break no thread.

and then her arm in Joe Cree's arm, standing before the candles and the smilax in Aunt Emm's front hall, so soon after and yet too late. And not once did he see the valley lilies tremble on her crown as Joe slipped the ring on her finger. Trailing clouds of glory, hell . . . Snip the cord as quick as you will on the female babe, the womb whispers to the blood, guard the secret, hide the secret, disguise the secret. It's a marvel forever. And Julia in white she'd no right to wear, in her disguise looking everything she was supposed to be, and Aunt Emm knowing, crumpled in her lace in the chair, disguising

it too, and accepting it because she foreknew it, the time when the blood will say, I've moved to a fresher vessel. And Joe looking down and squarely into Julia's blue eyes, straight on, seeing what he did not understand, the tenderness of surrender all there in his not her eyes. There was the mystery confronted, virgin and woman in one. And the mystery of folly, too, if folly it is, for a man to think he can look at a woman straight on and ever focus again. That look, that day, minted the two silver coins now on his eyes, round as a full moon, with a lady in each. Whoever saw two full moons except with eyes out of focus? And the moon in the sky to warn any man with sight to see, when she swings into the full, her face in profile, shining pale, her hair all curled in clouds and the ear beneath for whispering. There's the clue, and the wise lecher knows it, for the ear leads straight to the blood where the woman is listening all the time, preferring the word to the deed. In that crimson whorl the oldest word seems that instant made. True or false, it's no matter there, when it speaks the language of the blood. The deed will be done, the monotonous deed.

The shadows were at the window; time, Jack saw, had sped. He lifted the jug and drank deep, and drank alone.

and Brother Curran says, Who gives this woman to this man? *I said the sparrow* I do, I said, stepping forward and back, and words read backwards in any mother tongue, man talking to keep his courage up. For the blood knows. A girl child is born and it's all in the way of like for like, but when the man child plunges loose and the womb snaps back—there's the miracle, the square peg in the round hole. And she did it and nobody helped her. Duncan, poor Duncan, didn't know this. For when I stepped back, I stood in sight of him, Brother Curran going on with questions and answers, and Duncan quivering as if at any moment he would bolt, his eyelids rolled back into his body's spasm—like the dead coming to on the last day.

and Dickie, Brother Dickie, with his quiet smile, watching what

he had brought about but with an eye now and then for Duncan, throwing the unknown, the ravished heart an admonitory frown. I saw, and while the guests and bridesmaids crowded around the wedded pair, I led Duncan off. He followed like a sleepwalker going backwards to his dream. He drank the champagne like a docile child; and at the second glass his taste came back. He watched the bubbles break and rubbed his nose; and then tears large as glycerine drops fell down his nose. "For Christ's own sweet sake," I said, "pull yourself together," and I led him into the back of the back hall. "Quit thinking of yourself and think of her. She loves you as much as ever. Only marriage is a different kind of love." That look he gave me and then dropped his head on my shoulder and sobbed, if sobs they were. It was as if he had hacked his insides out. In a few moments he drew back. His voice was calm, a little hard, "I will," he said, and, "Couldn't Cree get any honest whiskey for his nuptials?" I put the two glasses in his hands and filled them with the amber bubbles and said, "Now, go find your partner. That little brunette bridesmaid in pink. She wants a good time." And with all the grace he had, he went towards her and scarcely a ripple in the wine. She was waiting near the bridal table. Aunt Emm had borrowed the horn of plenty. What it cost her no one knows, for she had to make the quick marriage seem long preparing. The board was loaded with jellies and creams and sugar castles hard and white in the candle-light, and in the center a tremendous pile of egg kisses under a gauze spun of sugar. They drank; she coughed and prettily struck her breast. She was young. Her coquetry, I thought, pleased him. He said, "Let's rob the nest," and with his finger slit the sugar veil and lifted, oh with such skill, one of the kisses from the pile. "Is this your kiss, Mr. Duncan?" she asked. I thought all was well, found my partner and wandered into the hall where the meats and salads were.

the fiddlers played

and wedding party and guests gathered in the parlor for the bride to cut the cake. By this time I had forgotten Duncan, although his voice would rise from the hum of merriment and talk like the

restatement of the theme in music, a little too high, a little too strained, but not enough to cause me alarm, or prepare me. I was caught up too, and the champagne gave me no pain. The knife was on the cake, and the cake in tiers was on the marble top, and Joe's hand on Julia's, the last symbolic act before the act, Joe in tight pants and cutaway coat and white waistcoat of brocaded satin, leaning over her, his face transformed—he seemed now the youth which even as a youth he never showed—he scarcely touched her, seeming a hovering strength, and I thought, He is equal to all we've put on him. Dickie has handled this with skill and I caught his eye and nodded, Well done; Dickie in plain view with Amelie beside him. They were holding hands, their bodies touching, with the crowd to blame if any noticed. A handsome woman, raw-boned but not thin, with lips too full for her mouth, her eyes all liquid as if the slightest jar would make them spill. Freshly widowed, just out of her weeds and with property. As the knife cut down, I saw her hand squeeze his. Their eyes met, and she gave a little toss of her head, and he followed the flow of her neck.

There's always one part of the body which gives meaning to the whole, and with Amelie it is the neck. It affirmed the strength of her shoulders. Always it swayed with that old fearsome grace. The slightest movement and the head responded, forever undulating, never at rest. But the end of that toss was a stillness. It held two seconds but that was enough for her eyes to meet those of Duncan. To Dickie it was a gesture completed, her attention all for him but heightened. But the eye, that old assassin, had killed his hopes. The eye, when you hate, may meet eye straight on and sink to the heart, for there's nothing to risk. And Duncan out of his hurt had flung his brother into waters he had never tried. I looked to make sure, and there Duncan stood like a hunter over the kill, the smile set to his teeth, the pupils like the points of a blade. How that smile, drawn against the teeth, scarred Duncan's face. It was obscene, so much hurt and so much cruelty open to any gaze.

But none saw but me. The fiddlers were tuning for the dance, old Lige Gannaway scraping his bow, bowing, calling Genmums choose your ladies. But the choice had already been made. The bride

and groom led off the first set, and the first tap of the toe, and the tap, tap, tap of the foot, heel and toe, and then the circling shuffle. And the fiddles screaming and the fiddle bows forward and back, and the rhythmic thump of the banjo, beneath the tune the thump, the beat of blood steady and full, swelling with the figures, quickening but never losing the beat. Sharp and staccato Duncan's voice, the thrust into the void, "Forward and back," bowing to the little brunette, his partner, but masked by the bow his glance for Amelie. And Lige calling "The Ocean Wave," and the bodies swirling, rising and dipping, from the waist up erect and taut, like buoys upon the sea's swell, while separate from this pliant stiffness knee ankle and foot bend, beat, twisting, fast to the rapid demands of the fiddles, moving only to the commands of the music . . .

Between sets the champagne passed, sparkling in the thin-stemmed glasses, the silver trays glowing white and gold, and Aunt Emm moving among guests and servants like a fretted ghost, directing here, correcting there, the servants stiffening at her approach. She wonders if the food will hold out; her eye counts the silver; she passes from kitchen to parlor, mumbling, "Will it never end?"

And the black musicians, laughing at the bubbles, gulping the wine, and with one long scrape of the bow the dance resumes. In the middle of a set all together and at once the guests feel something missing, and the little brunette cries, "They have gone upstairs." Lige presses down on the bow, lifts the fiddle from chest to shoulder, lays his large cheek against it, his eyes rolling towards the ceiling in a mockery of ecstasy, calls out, "Cage the bird."

And now the thud, and the thud of the dance, but the dance delayed as the figure changes until it seems the floor was keeping time to the music. Hands clasped around the ring, the bodies arched and still, like a chain of paper dolls all cut from the folds of one paper—but only an instant; then the ring circling the captured bird, forward and back, then treading the ring, reversing the flow, skirts swirling, the thumping feet become one foot, up and down. The floor boards quiver, giving and returning with the one rhythm, the music high and far away, like shrill insects sawing the air . . .

"Now cheat and swing," Lige Gannaway sings out.

and Amelie the widow breaks into the center. Neck curving, riding the flow, her curls bobbing, she dances first to one and another, but swinging away, cheating the arms. Dickie wears a complacent smile: she will at the proper moment choose him, before them all. That is the custom, that is the expected thing. But the smile dries on his face. It is Duncan's arms that hold her, lightly but surely, the very lightness the mark of possession. Did she cheat too close, meaning to; or was he too quick? None could tell nor did any ask, but every eye had fastened upon them, now the hub of the wheel vibrating the rim, now dashing but oh so lightly around the binding cage. Now only the swaying circumference, the surrounding couples watched the meaning of their feet unwind. Lige drew near with his fiddle; his bow took its time from Duncan's foot. And as they danced, from corner to corner, always the couple returned to center; then quietly, even soundlessly as a leaf from the bough, Duncan released his partner, so slowly drawing away that only the music told the frenzy of his feet. Only then, with Amelie frozen at the center, did the sense come of the perfect whole wrenched apart, Amelie barely shuffling, docile, waiting for the return. As a hummingbird darts, Duncan danced towards her, around her, in a corner alone: the blind search, forever seeking, forever thwarted, never recovering what he has lost, the half that will make him whole. From the stamp of his feet the tortuous wilderness grew in the room. Through its gloomy corridors the dance carried him, around slimy pools, or suddenly into an open glade, open to the far sky and its sudden shower of gold, and back again, mottled in green, over the shaded floor. As Duncan wove this pattern, the ring of bodies closed about him and Amelie, but it was he that drew them, panting, and the male sweat and the sweet astringency of scent and chalk fused, rolled in the heavy air of the parlor like mist, and the beast rolled over.

The little brunette cried out, "I can't breathe."

The dance went on, but the tempo changed. Lifting high this foot, then the other, the thighs spread in their strain, he brought

them down to every fourth beat; the fiddles were high, the guitar strumming bass. The tight fawn pants, the brocaded waistcoat rippled over his muscles. He seemed at one moment upside down prancing on the air; at another like one falling, kicking for a hold in the empty space of his fall. Amelie's neck was at last stilled; her feet had ceased to move. Her eyes were two ripe pears falling . . . half man, half beast, the dancer now threaded the maze. Always he seemed about to escape; yet always came back upon himself, back to center out of the corridors, out of the twisted ways blocking sight, returning to the one circle, the exact center from which he had been expelled. And all the while the dancers ringed closer, but now stopped, not only eyes but heads down upon the spot to which he had come. There he held, and there the flickering hooves cut the hound heart to shreds, the blood all ribboned with dust tangling at the hocks. The guitar thrummed three times: the quivering sound died away: the beast had emptied itself of its anguish. Then suddenly the dancer throws his head up, his nostrils all aquiver before the acid teasing scent blowing downwind. Duncan looks at Amelie and the smile scalds his face. He leans forward and slowly paws the floor. Lige lifts his bow like a whip. "Intermission," he calls.

The dancers remain in their spell; then one sighs, a couple breaks the ring. They drift apart. Dickie remains, his eyes glazed over, pale, tight lines at his mouth. The little brunette slips her arm into his. He follows like a man who is being led. The gaiety is smothered; voices murmur low in the parlor; ladies lean behind their fans and whisper. A loud crash sounds from the kitchen; the guests lift their heads, and afterwards they begin to move to and fro aimlessly; yet nervously, as if suddenly they had found themselves in the wrong house. When the trays of wine pass, hands reach too eagerly. The servants frown as they balance the swaying trays. More wine is called for. The servants seem slow, but the wine holds out until at last the voices grow animated again. They rush together; spill over from room to room. They rise and fall in waves of sound. Above the surge women's laughter breaks and scatters. The dance resumes.

The dance resumes but Amelie and Duncan do not make a part of it. They are seen no more by the guests that night. So that they will not be missed, or if missed, make a scandal, Dickie is to be seen everywhere at once. He slaps this man on the shoulder; he brings some tidbit to a lady resting; he bows before a wallflower. For the old ladies sitting in the faint aroma of camphor he orders milk punch, but his eyes are not there. In the deepest part of the night old Doctor Randall, the most circumspect, the most formidable in his decorum, kicks off his shoes and jigs like a boy. The wine has done its work. This is the moment Dickie has awaited. He slips away, knowing he will not be missed. Furtively he withdraws to open and close Aunt Emm's many doors until the unbelievable belief, the inevitable door stands ajar. His hands rise like a blind man feeling air; they fumble the door's edge. Slowly it swings to; his shoulder rolls against it, stooped, as if too weary to ever move again.

And so Duncan runs away with Amelie. There is none to forbid or counsel a widow; and Dickie, with his diploma already framed on the wall, runs back to medical school, for what took place when Duncan ended his dance was beyond Dickie's medicine, Amelie the young widow swimming out of eddy water back into the main current. What is a widow but knowledge deprived, and what did Amelie see but her loss restored. Did the trampling scare her? Or Duncan's smile? She saw only the hurt behind it, matching her own hurt, and she had the very salve to heal it. She thought she had. She was deluded. It was a husk she took that night, the passionate husk. Grasp it so tight not even a blade of grass can slip between, and yet she found always another there. This she must have learned with what bitterness he could only surmise. Yet she did not give up, else she would not have followed Duncan to the war. That surely was her desperate bid for love, but it was death she drew and afterwards she was out of hope and full of hate—for Julia. What can so well ease a memory festering from spoiled hope as hating the cause, so that hate can seem a good, easing so deep a hurt. What a role has Julia played in Amelie's mind!

"Dickie, why did you run to medical school?" Jack said aloud.

"I was weak in surgery," the voice replied. "Call it running if you like."

Was his mind so fluid it had no bounds? Had it seized the very tone of Dickie's thoughts, given voice to silence? . . . and then he felt the slight shock and the chair arms like thongs in his flesh. His eyes widened upon the dark swelling in the office, and there leaning in the doorway, framed by the last blue of dusk, was Dickie, his good leg firm to the floor, his peg thrust forward with the awkward balance of a mannequin in a window. From outside the air blew fresh, as from some distant rain. The two brothers regarded each other in that alert stillness which accompanies nightfall. Jack said, his words flickering tongue and lips, "One hour goes into the next. Time is a chain, but the past is the only tense that conjugates the present. There you are, Brother Dickie, to prove it."

Dickie remained in a silence that would not free him. "Well, didn't you run away?" He called to his brother, as across a distance, "To keep the surface smooth?"

"Isn't that all anybody can do?" Dickie answered quietly. "Keep the surface smooth?"

Jack reached for his jug. "Come in. Take a drink." And Dickie entered with his clumsy swing. He felt the swell of remorse for blaming his brother; then annoyance at the soft thumping of the peg, the deliberate movement. He said gruffly, "It takes more than court plaster to mend a heart."

The chair opposite scraped the floor. And then the pause as the chair stretched and creaked before the body settling, as deliberately Dickie drank, at last thumped the jug upon the writing drawer of the secretary. "That helps," he said. He wiped his sleeve across his mouth. "Winston and the others are washing Joe. They may have trouble getting his clothes on."

"A man dresses every day," Jack said, "but the day comes when no clothes fit. Rip the coat up the back. It won't show where he's going."

"It won't show anyway. We'll have to put the top down right away."

"Greer got in with the coffin then."

"He and Rhears are rubbing it down."

"They'd better be rubbing salt on Joe. And spread aplenty in the coffin floor."

"You think that will keep it all smooth?"

The quiet bitterness of Dickie's voice arrested him for a moment.

He blurted out, "Rot and corruption! Oh, Lord, smell me for what I am. The body's last strain after paradise. Our noses are too impure, to stand nature so essential. And we've found something we can't dilute. But we can give it the old salt cure. Pretend a few hours it's not so, and then the old heave and the ho, and six foot under."

Dickie made a savage movement. "I knew I would find you picking at the old scab."

"You are mistaken," Jack said evenly. "I have been thinking if you only had stepped out that night before all the guests, had said—Amelie is my woman. You, Duncan, keep your hands off. I was thinking if you had done that, Joe Cree and the rest of us would be going about our business, with just our common troubles."

"While you were doing all that thinking, did it occur to you it might have been too late? No. You only see so far—always the image out of context: such as, Duncan and Julia wandering innocently the deep woods. Pete Legrand, you forgot him. Well, I didn't, and Julia has had for eighteen years a normal married life, and Lucius a name and a home."

"But now," Jack said, "the eighteen years are up."

"Did you ever think it might have been too late for me, too?"

Lest Dickie's plea for understanding might turn him aside, he said, and immediately it seemed too harsh, "It was Amelie told Joe his boy was a bastard."

The words hung there between them. Dickie made no response and yet Jack felt the silence struggle. His accusation was beyond Dickie's medicine, for the ailment was now Dickie's, too. He would give him time, holding there to the roof of his mind, that unruffled

board upon which he moved his counters with such skill, took a trick, lost one, won or lost the game. But there was the catch. The game always came around again. Except that Dickie couldn't play it his way this time.

"Amelie has suffered much," Dickie said at last.

"You must marry her." Jack was surprised at the casual tone with which he spoke.

Dickie did not raise his voice. "Are you mad?"

"It's the only way to make her hold her tongue."

Dickie's sigh was deliberate. "Try to use a little common sense."

"It's uncommon sense we need now."

"You know we've scarcely seen her since Duncan's death. You know we are strangers to her. But granted this was not so, it would be a brutal thing to do, to offer her another loveless marriage."

"You don't love her then?"

"Is that irony?"

"I thought you'd been pining all these years."

"Listen. Amelie has taken enough from us. But how can you believe for a moment she would not understand such a ruse?"

"You are good at ruses. Why don't you try to make this one work. Go see her. Maybe she's been playing hide and seek with you."

"You didn't hear a word I said," and Dickie thrust his peg towards his brother. "Look at this." He waited, but Jack would not turn his head. Then, "There's a simpler way. If you are right and I'm not convinced she told Joe, I'll send Lucius off to school. Julia can . . ."

"You can't do that," Jack blurted out.

"I can't?"

"His mother will need him. I can teach him his Latin and Greek. I can cipher too."

"Ah, Jack, Jack." There was all the sadness of despair in his voice. "Look at this stump. I'll tell you how I lost it."

"I know how you lost it."

"But you weren't there."

Jack felt the inward qualm of one who had forced a situation

too far, but he could only say, "Well, go ahead," and lifted the jug and drank to recover himself. As Dickie waited, he said, "Make haste. I've got to think of something since you won't help. You've never been one of us."

He had not meant to say that, and his cruelty shamed him and all the more because Dickie took no notice of it. He had dropped his head for a moment, but he raised it with that finality of demand which confession makes. "That day of the raid," he said, "after you had ridden off with Amelie to take her to that house behind the lines, Duncan was impatient to set off at once. Joe refused. It was still daylight and too risky. But Duncan took Joe aside and told him something that made him agree. I suppose he told of his doubts of Beverly. Anyway we set out for Parcher's Cove, and as we drew near, Duncan went ahead. The manner of his going worried me. It had a recklessness, a fixity, that was unnatural, for ordinarily on these raids he was the most circumspect of scouts. Why had he gone to Beverly at all? He knew the way in and he also knew Beverly's delusion that Parcher's Cove, merely because he willed it, would be forever free of any human habitation but his own. Duncan's excuse that Beverly would guide us that night, as I thought of it, seemed specious. So I followed him to the waterfall. It was still light when I got there. Duncan had had time to find out if all was clear, but he was nowhere in sight. I swam my horse across the pool, under the waterfall of such poor luck for us, and dismounted in the rock room behind. It was dark of course but not so dark as to hide the passage. I had a torch, but more and more I had a premonition that something was very wrong. I must go on and see; and yet at the mouth of that jagged entrance I hesitated. There's something about a cave that draws and frightens too. The cool moist feel of it, its lightless depths and all the eyeless things lying in wait as you blindly stagger in. It's eerie enough in broad daylight, but I had come upon it at dusk. I took a breath and felt my way in. I had not gone far before I heard the animal grunts. They reverberated out of some struggle. I shouted my brothers' names and the names came back, wavering and mocking in the echo of such places. I couldn't run over such a

footing. I had to stop and light my torch. I had to. You must understand this. You may imagine how long it seemed before the hissing flame wavered along those narrow, sinister walls. Half running, half slipping, I came midways of the passage and saw them, locked in each other's arms. I shouted again but again my voice seemed only to boomerang, muffle by its large sound my plea to them, for it was a plea. And then that loud maniacal laughter. It was the smile at the wedding supper turned vocal. I felt it as a chill on my skin and scalp. I hesitated, hearing only the scuffling feet, and then went further in. I went on until I smelled it, the unmistakable stench of burning powder. I even saw it on the floor at their feet. It twisted like an angry eye withdrawing. I only saw it as it disappeared. With what cunning Beverly had planted that fuse, stringing it to a crack that could not be reached. I sensed this, for I could not move from the spot. I was fixed there. You will say I showed the white feather. I will never know. I don't think there was time to reach them. I tell myself there would not have been time enough to separate them. But is there time in a cavern? Does the sun reach it, or the moon? And yet that fuse was burning time, and then my eardrums cracked and I heard all the waterfalls in the world come down at once, exploding in light and at the center, in that eternal instant, Duncan and Beverly mashed together. I see them now forever one, and yet more than one. Does it take such violence to make perfection of what they sought in the wilderness. Do we ever find? Can we ever help? We can only do a small service here and there, and be stingy with that. I came to in the dark, and I thought, So this is what it is to be dead. And then I felt the weight and the tiny knives somewhere in front of me. It was the boulder pinning my leg beneath it."

As he waited Jack felt the sougning of the dark, and then he leaned over and put his hand hesitantly upon his brother's shoulder. Dickie took no notice of it.

"Fratricide and suicide and whatever it is to give a leg. Beverly, Duncan, me. You are whole yet. At least in body."

"I've kept the home place," Jack said. His voice begged for agreement.

But Dickie said slowly and clearly, "The home place has deprived you of a home."

A soft yellow light opened upon the walls of the office. They saw John Greer bowing, the lamp in his hands, his face a shining bronze. "I brought you all some light. It's good dark now."

Jack said automatically, "We all need a drink."

John Greer took his glass out of his white coat. He smiled for comfort, as he made his elaborate bow, outdoing them in courtesy.

They filled their mugs in silence and Dickie, fingering his before he drank, said, "Am I one of us?"

Slowly Jack rose to his feet. He bowed to his brother. He tried to smile but his throat was dry. "Beverly, Duncan, Dickie, Jack, and John Greer. We are all one of us. We'll drink to that."

"To that," Dickie said and raised his mug.

Lucius leaned against a post in the little summer house. It was good dark now. It was good to be alone. He had to be alone for a while. He had tried to stay in the house, be near his mother, but the house was outlandish. Even his own room. It began before the people came, in that silence when the rooms seemed to hold their breath, and the family and servants opening and closing doors, hurriedly, aimlessly, as if they were hunting something mislaid but without memory of what it was. Then the house stirred, as if the doors had brought back its breath. It began to whisper, first in the hallway where Cousin Molly Pilcher met at the door those who came, mostly women at first, the men hanging back in the drive, or talking quietly together in the yard. It was so many women that marked the strangeness, leaning to Cousin Molly's face, as if they could spare only so much breath, as if breath had found a new worth. Some nodded in a hushed conspiratorial manner, and Cousin Molly to them would raise her eyes in genteel sadness. A few, reluctantly, she sent in to his mother with—She's in the chamber.

At first wandering, he hunted some familiar place, but Cousin Molly's nine girls were everywhere, in the kitchen, in the dining room. They took the food from the neighbors and guests, were they

guests? they could not all be mourners, what were they . . . ? Cousin Molly with the touch of thumb and finger would raise the cloth, glance beneath, and with the barest lisp—Nobody but you can make bread so light; or sometimes she would look the compliment, as if words failed her. Or lift those soft, white, helpless hands of hers towards the hamper, or cake, or the heaped bowl; and the neighbor would hesitate an instant before releasing the gift, mistrusting the hands; but always one of Cousin Molly's daughters would step forward, reach for the offering, receive her mother's faint smile. And suddenly the neighbor watching the hands withdraw, hovering in their elegance as if about to bless, and then wavering elsewhere as if forever cheated of the object . . . suddenly the neighbor in confusion remembers her own hands stiff and swollen from dishwater and picking up stove wood, and rubs their palms upon her dress, or hides them in its folds.

Did Sherman make those hands, when he said he would bring every southern woman to the washboard? And did Cousin Suds really do the washing, saying there's one he won't bring to it?

Why did he fill his mind with words and faces and new-fangledness? And hands, rough or smooth. He knew what had driven him from the house, here in the garden to hide . . . then swimming before his face the coffin blocked his sight. Wedge-shaped and impervious, at last set in the parlor and that body so stiff within, the doors closed and the family gathered; and as he looked, he almost said aloud—Why, he's fat . . . and then it curled into his nostrils, thick and lazy; it struck his stomach like a blow. What's Cousin Charles doing in here, he thought, and looked behind, and there was nobody but his mother and uncles, then Rhears lifting the top and in his hands it seemed as light and thin as an eggshell. Those eggshells . . . he fled and heard his mother's voice, stifled, "Lucius"

there on the porch, with the bitter acrid taste in his mouth, his stomach heaving, he said, no, no, he looks like this. But not his father's face but the features of his Cousin Charles instead to mock him, peering furtively, the frail body shrinking, the two ends of his

moustache drooping towards his wet baby mouth, and the frightened voice—You'll let in a draft. And with the fast shuffle gliding to the door to shut it. It sloughed to in the thick air, and the smell rolled like swollen rot in the tight room. And he could only see the pile of eggshells three feet high, and old Mattie's voice in his ears, *Mister Charlie, he suck aigs*. He had always thought before it was a good cook's revenge for one who never came to eat her food. Now, his thoughts all shattered by the literal fact, he could only look and not look at the pile of shells. He tried to concentrate and heard his voice, faint, as if his breath were tainted too, "Mama says, the coffin, where is it?"

But Cousin Charles did not hear. He flitted about the room as if they were playing hide and seek, darting glances from under his red eyelids but never looking once straight on.

His own back had not budged from the door; he put his hand to the knob.

—No. no. Don't go. You must see. I've hung your father to the family tree.

They bent together over the table. —Now, here, the little old man said. —No. Not this. This is the line of the Lindsay Arabians. Our ancestor of revolutionary fame, Thomas Cree, brought them with him over the mountains. I keep their line, too, the noblest breed of them all. They go back to the old Dominion. I will tell you an amusing story on myself. It will not bear repeating. And he raised one slick brown finger. —I was tracing a collateral branch, I was perturbed, there was a link missing. Very intent was I, yes indeed I was, the mind is too nimble for the fingers. And do you know what I had done? His gaze was hard and bright. —I had written Hannibal Morton, issue of Beau Dare, out of Gypsy Dawn. He gave a harsh dry chuckle. —Quite amusing eh? Hannibal Morton, issue of Beau Dare, out of Gypsy Dawn. Of course I corrected my mistake.

All the while the slick fingers were unrolling the parchment, and the tree grew before their eyes, the thick brown trunk, with names as swollen as arteries, and running off and out the skeletal limbs, the inked-in names as faint as veins. And from the limbs

hung like picnic boxes other names. Upon one of these, at the end of a branch, the finger came down. —Here hangs your father, he said. Now he is safe. Here all is clear, down this limb, joining at the trunk, and down it to the roots where lies recumbent the Immigrant. I have another chart which takes us across the water.

—Cousin Charles, where . . . ?

—Life. You never know, it's so . . . but here they hang in unbroken line.

He shouted—Where is the coffin?

The little man shrank away, the furtive look returned. —The coffin, oh yes, he said distastefully. Oh, let me see, aint it on the porch? No, no, indeed no. It's under the winesap, in the old orchard. Now, boy, for your own branch . . .

Jack stepped into the night. He took a deep breath; it tasted of distant rain; that mule smelled it. He could tell the way it lifted its head. The barn lot was now full of mules and horses, tied to the fence rails, with heads lowered to the hay thrown wastefully on the ground. Or leaning over the fence, their big bodies still and dark, melting into shadow, the jaws side-chopping methodically, chomping the fire, the air become fire, but it was only the prosaic reflection of the blaze of the barbecue fire with a fresh log just cast on. The flames wavered but the glow was steady, a rosy light among the scattered buggies and carry-alls, their empty shafts unpraised as thin as whips, or carelessly dropped to the ground. These seemed entirely abandoned, but in the side yard, backed against the fence, stood three covered wagons down from the hills, their canvas tops half rolled back like old women's bonnets. Against those tops the glow faded, sank down. Down the driveway a buggy was stealing away. . . .

Nobody kept close to the fire. Circling it, neighbors and townspeople stood or squatted, came up, moved away. They kept it up for comfort's sake, he guessed, for surely old Suds had enough coals for his pit. He could tell to a coal how much he needed, it was said. He trusted nobody with the barbecuing, not even his girls, although Adelaide helped skin the carcass. Adelaide . . . and then Jack stopped

there on the garden path, and Dickie's words were there—*The home place has deprived you of a home.*

Suppose he and Adelaide had run away together, and he had brought her to the home place. It was his then, the property had been divided and Beverly had deeded his share for twenty-five pounds of lead and so much salt and powder, yearly paid. Suppose they had done it, and almost they had in that longest period of loneliness when he was at home alone. But then the last hunt and what it had precipitated had drawn him back. But Dickie was wrong. "Dickie is wrong," he said harshly. There is only one home, and only the child knows it. He sucks it in at the teat; he crawls in it, and when he stands up, it is home he walks and breathes. All else is strange, hostile . . . the woman clasped to your breast, in the house you bring her to, sacramentally blessed or otherwise, she is still strange, her ways strange, and though you live with her the allotted time, it can only be as in a foreign country, well loved, well known, but with something withheld, something forever elusive. And when the children come, as come they will, they are only half kin. And there will be the one child no kin at all, taking after that outland blood you have brought to your house and heart. Dickie was such a one. It was why Dickie did not understand.

A laugh wavered upon the air, gay and free, but cautious. It was from one of three squatting on their haunches, their noses to the thick rich odors rising from the pit. Was that Steele the well digger? That was old Judge Ewing for certain standing under the hackberry, upright and fierce, the trapped ferocity of age all there in his eyes. Beside him his old cronies watched with his eyes, withdrawn into the actual shadow as they lived in the shadow of his will. An atheist, must he doubt all things, except his own knowledge. It was plain he was criticizing old Suds as Suds knelt before the meat, holding his hands over the heat, raising them and lowering them, as if blessing it. That other figure, strange yet familiar, leaning over abruptly to thrust the shovel into the coals, now turning towards the pit . . . with a shock he saw it was Adelaide. It was the shoulders that had tricked him: they were as large as a man's. She walked out of his gaze,

which held fixed to that density of the air she had vacated. He stood bereft, leaning forward as if looking down a long corridor which the flame, suddenly leaping, lit up. The flame died; Jack turned and plunged down the path, deep into the garden.

Steele, rising from his haunches, said, "Whur's Mister Cropleigh off to? Reckon anything wrong?"

"Running after that jug he's got hid out."

The three pair of eyes watched Jack until he passed a myrtle bush, where the path angled to the summer house.

"That beef makes a body dry."

The three pair of eyes turned speculatively towards the pit, and the rich brown mound lying atop the faint glow.

"I thank thar's a swig or two in the waggin bed."

"Thank you could rustle it amongst them shucks?"

"I thank so."

The three men stood up. Separately they ambled back through the buggies and the carry-alls towards the wagons along the fence.

"No," Jack said. "I was saved for something other than domestic bliss." And he heard his voice, strained, defensive. He waited, withdrawn into the myrtle, for his throat to relax. He felt all his weight in his boots. There was the summer house barely visible. He would go there and rest. As he passed along the path, the lights from the dwelling, from the porch lamps, burned into the dark a short way, like the artificial rays in a picture. The dwelling itself had the empty festive air of a preparation for guests who do not come; and yet people were going in and out; a few voices detached themselves from the silence, fell to the ground. Through the lace curtains at the dining-room windows shadows wavered about the table in ghostly ritual. The spiced odor of barbecue penetrated the garden, and yet no wind stirred.

"Uncle Jack?"

He stopped just without the step. This was surely a sign. He knew very well for what he had been saved. "You here, son?" he

asked, and they sat down on the rough bench. And yet, now that he had been given this moment, Jack felt bereft of words.

Lucius said in a low voice, "I hated you this afternoon."

Nephew and uncle sat side by side, almost touching; but neither looked at the other, but outwards where the dark tangled the vines in the lattice.

"I hate myself now," Lucius added vehemently. "But it's more than that . . ."

"I just passed the mourners," Jack interrupted. "They are closing in on old Suds. If he don't hurry with the meat, they liable to eat him."

"The mourners?" The boy asked, startled.

Jack jerked his head towards the back lot. Lucius waited, trying to respond. "Is it true," he asked suddenly, "Cousin Suds did the washing after the war? Because Sherman said he would bring every southern woman to the washboard?"

"Did you ever look at Molly's hands?"

"Yessir. She lifts them so carefully, as if the air can bruise."

"It can do worse than that," Jack took it up, his tongue freed now. "Sure old Suds washed the clothes. He washed them for two years. Who but he would keep it up for so long? The literal act up to the armpits in suds and water, and I guess the clothes got clean enough. But they don't stay clean. The literal mind don't see this. It just keeps on washing away and as long as it keeps in motion it don't have to see. But one day the belly growls and Suds has to go to the fields, for hunger is a real reality. And the clothes pile up. And Suds says I'll get around to them Saturday, but Saturday comes all tangled up with the seasons and grass is in the crop. And he says next Saturday for sure. And then one day he comes in and finds fresh drawers and a shirt, and he cries out to down the terror—I won't have a lady washing. But Molly is a woman now throwing up a baby every ten months, and Adelaide a grown girl says—I'll wash. Suds don't hear, or if he hears, he's said—One southern lady won't soil her hands. Just one. And if you can do a menial thing, you can do another, and so each girl as she got big

enough not only washed the clothes but picked up a hoe too and went to the fields. And Suds no longer saying—I'll get around to those clothes, but just wearing them, as if they'd washed themselves, just as he don't ask how the grass got out of the crops, so long as the crop makes, for every night when he comes in from the fields, he picks up those white, those soft, those useless hands he's ruined nine pair to keep."

"But sometimes," Lucius said, "he must look at the girls' hands."

"He don't even see Molly's. For a hand picks up and sets down. It opens and closes. It caresses. A hand does all the things it was made to do. What Suds picks up is that thing he's put behind his sight. Put there in the terror of the truth. That's what he sees as he lifts those hands, filling the retina with the shine of rotten wood in night's low ground. Truth shows in the open light of day, and Suds couldn't stand the glare. Few can. For the truth was Sherman's kind of war had ruined Suds. Complete. House gone, barn, stock, tools, slaves. Nothing but the land left, with no fence to tell its lines, the dirt of one field running into the next around the world. That's too far to see. It's an ailment as old as the common cold, the terror of the distant view. The Indians knew it, and in the West they had a way to tell the boy from the man. The Indian boy was always put down among the women, but the time came when they drove a stick through the fleshy part of his chest, tied thongs at each end and from there to the pole, and all day long leaning back to keep the thong tight, with head back and eyes open to the sun, he followed it blazing about the pole. And in the West there are no trees or clouds to block the view. And it may be the pain in his chest eased the pain in his eye, and there were the drums to beat up his courage, and maybe the chanting distracted him some. But if he made the circle, the boy died but the man was there. And afterwards the horizon did not seem the promise or terror of space, nor did he see in the seasons the grind of time but in both that eternal reflection, for he had seen the circle come back on itself, and that great distance the sun come

down to the eye, one blinding whiteness, one bright pain—flesh, body, time, space, center, circumference—forever drowned in that illumination which is all. That's why the Indian's eye is clear and steady. It opens at dawn and shuts at night in the afterglow of that mystery."

Jack paused, his head turned as if he were hearing the echo of his own words; then he said, "But not the Suds and the Sher-mans. And after all they are cut from the same bolt of cloth. They both are in and out of the same dirty tub, forever crying you—not me—will be clean."

At this moment the clouds shifted and the moon showed its last quarter. In the vague haze Lucius glanced covertly at his uncle; saw his posture take the form of some inner reflection. Out of the lull, beyond the garden, voices about the barbecue pit intruded with a freer, clearer rhythm. With shame Lucius felt the gnaw of hunger. Out of his sense of betrayal he blurted out, "But papa was no Suds."

Jack got up abruptly and moved to the other side of the summer house. He looked out its entrance, which exposed the drive as it curved towards the verandah; then he said with deliberate care, still looking away, "You won't find this in the Scriptures. Put your ear to the ground and you hear what the official account leaves out. The dirt knows its own."

"Yes?" Lucius said.

"Rumor has it that Adam did not leave the garden empty-handed."

"You mean . . . ?" He hesitated to say—fig leaf.

"He took a little of the dirt with him."

"The dirt?"

"The dirt of paradise." Jack swung his head in a kind of angry despair. "If only he had said—The sweat is not bitter that earns the bread of life, and walked out upright, like a man."

"You forget the flaming sword."

"I forget nothing." And now he looked directly towards

Lucius. "The winds blew it. It was only a handful. It was enough to blind all the generations of man."

The moon went under and Jack's face swam away, but his voice went on, "I've gone a roundabout way, but always you end up at home. Your Uncle Beverly said—I won't tread the mill of this world. I'll live with the beasts. I'll begin at the beginning and know the pure image of divinity imprisoned in the darkness of nature. Your Uncle Duncan, not saying it, for he could only feel that total innocence of love before carnal knowledge. When they were young, he and your mother had no love but for each other, and for one to think was for the other to act. It was the pure fire that does not burn. But the garden they wandered was never there. The world was though. It destroyed my brothers, your uncles. They tried, but the dust that never settles got in their eyes too."

"Mama," Lucius almost cried. "What are you telling me?"

"Whatever the truth, put your eyes to it. Be like that Indian boy. Don't shut them, whatever it is you have to see."

The roll of wheels, the soft crunch of hooves filled the silence pulsing between them, as Jack almost whispering, "For no matter how much sweat wets the common dirt, never will it fashion . . ."

"Fashion what, Uncle Jack?" Lucius was leaning forward and whispering, too.

"Aint that Squire Drumgoole's team and barouche?" Jack asked sharply.

The changed tone brought Lucius up, but he repeated, "Never what?"

But Jack's attention was now all for the vehicle, slowing before the horse block. Before the driver could draw in the reins, a man stepped lightly out of the back seat, into the drive. He paused before the columned verandah; then with the firm unconscious stride of the man who possesses what he sees walked up the steps towards the entrance doors.

"That's Mister Pete Legrand," Lucius said with surprise.

"Yes. And the barouche is Squire Drumgoole's," Jack replied. "Or was."

"What's he doing . . . ?"

"Oh, the honeycomb of paradise. The bitter bitter sweat."

Jack turned; put his hands on Lucius's shoulders and shook them lightly. "You go in to your mother," he said.

"And you?" Lucius asked, and in his voice showed alarm.

"I'll go mix with the mourners."

Not until Jack had disappeared, not wandering away as he had come into the garden, but with that long sloping stride moving towards the house, not until then did Lucius suffer the full measure of shame. Oh, his Uncle Jack had seen him run like a puling child to his mother. No wonder that long indirect way of telling him to be a man. Not to blink at the truth. And then his shame gave before that subtle sense of betrayal which a lack of understanding on the part of those we love always leaves to work its hurt. Jack should have known he had just given under the shock of grief, and that he would face up to whatever it was he had to face. His father's death had deprived him of his father's presence, but not of his love for him. But Jack's doubts in a way had deprived him of himself, for if you can't be understood, how can you be known? Then how can love or any intimacy mean anything? Are we just bodies bumping into each other, smiling, caressing, frowning, alone in our incapacity to impart what we are, and share it, and so grow strong in this sharing?

He knew what the truth was. They were ruined. The farm and everything they owned would go under the hammer. His father had failed in his gamble. That was the meaning of Mr. Legrand's appearance here, to see what he would buy in, to see if it was a bargain. Squire Drumgoole's barouche was the sign. Did Jack think he'd missed the point of that, too? *Go in to your mother . . .*

He breathed deep, he sighed in a swelling sadness, to think how much knowledge he had to bear, how little Jack understood. It seemed now that Jack was boy and he the man. If his uncle knew what the full truth really was! And Lucius held his breath until his chest swelled, until the pain throbbed black behind his

eyes, bulging them, and he released his breath and it came out thin and stale, and his strength ran down his legs like trembling water. *His papa wanted the tree to fall on him.*

He had faced up to that at last. Now and here. With sweet bitterness he said it again, "Papa killed himself over me."

Everything between them had changed after he had gone to town to take up one of the notes, at the bank, or was it the last note to Aunt Amelie. It must have been she. His father would have been anxious to clear his indebtedness to her first. Maybe he went up knowing he would need more time and she had refused it. And as he saw he would lose his gamble, he saw further. He had risked everything for him, Lucius, and something had made him decide his son was not worthy. That was bound to be it. He was not a man to kill himself because he had lost. He could not do it for a loss, great as it was! It came to him, that time he discovered his father looking at him with such strange intensity, as if he had to probe to his very center, to see his son for what he was, to find there the Lucius he had once thought worthy. Another time he had surprised his father, and they both looked away quickly, in embarrassment. After that the strain, the remoteness, grew between them. If only he had gone to him, said—Papa, what's the matter? For his father was too proud to bring it up himself. A father hates to tell his son he has failed. Oh, he saw it all now. His father was waiting for him to understand, to read his mind, to come out with it—What does it matter? We'll do it some other way. Yes, he saw it all. His father had felt the same betrayal Jack had just made him feel.

How frivolous he must have seemed, how callous to the unspoken shades of feeling, when he asked permission to go up the Peaks of Laurel with Jack and Jeff—to witch a well. To go for a week in the woods, pleasure bent, and leave his father alone with his travail.—Who will keep tab on Schott? his father had asked, and there was no smile on his face. That was the appeal, and he had pretended to himself it was a teasing way of giving

permission. He knew there was no smile. If only his father had said—No, I need you here.

That would have broken the tension between them. For he was not going to the Peaks altogether for fun. He was running away from the strangeness, almost a denial he felt, a denial on the part of both of them. He could see it now, always you see too late, maybe. He was not only running away from, but running to something of his own; and he felt again that fresh surge of body and being he had felt at day dawn, in the tight hot loft room at the tollgate. Had his father felt more, at least that his flight was a disowning of what they had been to each other?

and then abruptly, as if it had been dropped

The low burst of laughter and the boy and girl plunged around the myrtle hedge; and yet so quick did they recoil they barely touched him. The moon was high and bright, and so they knew him at once. It was Conrad and Lucy. Their laughter faded as a light dims, and quietly Lucy freed her hand. She straightened her dress, dropping her eyes to the movement of her hands. Conrad was more awkward. His face took on an unnatural pious look, but not his body. The violent motion he had brought with him into the garden charged it in its stillness, as if waiting upon his stupid face. "Sorry, Lucius," he mumbled, and Lucius's heart went out to them, to be with them. He remembered nothing of what he had been thinking, only feeling the ache of being set apart from what they had brought with them here. Conrad showed so plainly that his mourning cut him off from them. So he hid his longing by a frown and nodded gravely. They waited respectfully before this composure of great sorrow. Conrad looked down and dug his toe in the path. It seemed the three of them could find no way to break apart, when Lucy said with formality, "We are sorry about your papa," and Conrad eagerly, too eagerly, "Yes, Lucius, old fellow."

Lucius nodded as solemnly as he could, as if it were too much for speech. He felt very old and remote from them now. He turned away, leaving them to marvel at his stern grief. He walked slowly around the myrtle and stopped. Impulsively he bent his ear into

its rough foliage. Behind it their feet crunched the gravel of the path; then silence, and at a distance the drift of laughter low and intimate . . . suddenly the laughter muffled itself; the soundless night descended upon the garden. The stems of myrtle sprigged his neck; one stem jabbed into the tender whorl of the outer ear, and he jerked back and rubbed it.

Oh, they were not thinking of him. He had been a momentary obstacle forgotten as their feet, padding night's old prow, wandered further into cover, back where the great trees defined the garden's limits, sap, leaf, and bark dissolved into monstrous shadows, hovering. It was only last night, it seemed strange that it could have been only last night that he and Ada Belle had been drawn together by laughter too, as they fled the irate relief in Jack's voice, into the sweet night air after the vomit stench of the room, holding hands, leaping together from the dog-run and, still laughing, their heads together, hair touching, tingling, they reached the edge of the yard. To be stopped only by the solid look of the woods. They could still hear Jack's voice raised in mocking choler; they hesitated; they strained to listen, as if they could not bear to miss a word. —The little black hen, he had said, and how forced his giggling. And she—Snake bit. But there was no more laughter in them. He did not know his voice, looking not at her but into the lighter cleavage of darkness which the path made in the trees. —Where's that go? he asked. She turned and they walked in without speaking. She withdrew her hand and stepped ahead. He noticed the heavy beat in his throat and ears did not keep time with his steps. Once the tree tops opened up and the moon spilled down the trunks like wet whitewash. The wind puffed; the ground wavered. He came up beside her and put his arm boldly about her waist. Still without saying anything, she took it away; and then they were in the shades of night again. She led the way, and he followed.

It seemed no time at all as the woods thinned and the wan light writhed among the branches or lay like smears of paste on the dark ground, and he knew they were coming to the place they

sought. It came to him that there is no time if there is no thought, and his mind was as empty as a dry well. That was all he knew until they were standing in the expanse of the moon's full quarter, upon a flat rock, looking down upon the narrow cut of a cove. He moved against her. She did not respond, but stood there quietly. Could this be the girl who had been so bold, suggestive, he'd even thought so common. But gay in her rough talk as they played the farce of snake and hen. She raised her hand, pointing to the distant ridge—Yonder way lies Parcher's Cove.

The ridge lay in the distance and yet seemed near, a blue-black mass where the sky came down, so that it seemed to Lucius they stood in the center of a cave, and that the light both hid and disclosed the multiplicity of things, where all that was separate, all that was individual, trees, rocks, earth, the two of them standing there, had flowed together into one common reflection of—what? He could not say, could only feel this. He looked out upon the mystery and then down upon the girl. No wonder they said the moon bewitched. She seemed no kin to Ada Rutter now, no kin to herself, the girl who had leaped off the dog-run to come here with him. Her calico garment had turned some dark rich stuff, a deeper blend of open neck and face. He looked hard at the purity of her features, leaned towards the lips no longer stained by snuff. The parted mouth now stained her face. She said—A man taken to the cove to live with the beasts, a time ago.

This brought him up. —Yes, I know. It was my Uncle Beverly. His words seemed remote, unreal. He had the odd feeling that it had not yet happened. —He and another uncle died there during the war. The words made a blurred sound. Her face was upturned to his in wonder. He gave in to this wonder; felt the warmth of her body mingle with the warmth from his, while all about the night chill pressed them together. He lifted his arms, but she slipped away and was walking from him. She walked with a sinuous grace and lightness, as if the rock she trod, reamed by the famished moon, flowed only with night's vapor, and the sky was her journeying place. At the edge she dropped, and his heart stopped a beat.

And then he saw she had not fallen; she had paused upon some step of air, half in darkness, half in the dissolving light. Her face lay back upon her hair, and the hair floated as fierce as a tiny rain cloud. She arched her neck to the milky light. A shadow slit it like a knife.—Jump down, she said.

He jumped into the pit beside her. She steadied him with her hand. With their backs to the curving rock wall they edged their way along the narrow ledge to a gap. Sighting as in some dream, she sprang across. He looked once into the abyss and, holding his breath, leaped beside her. He felt the moss give and gazed to see where they were. They had come to a secret place, a kind of shelf in the wall. The ceiling and floor gaped like an open mouth. Its breath was chill; yet the mossy floor reached outwards for the light in a rounded jagged lip. To this they moved. They stood upon it as upon a wafer poised in the deeps of space, while up the cove the moon water rolled and spilled. They sank under it as one body into the giving moss. Languidly their arms and legs entwined. Their mouths pressed together for mortal breath; their teeth jarred, parted before the flickering softness, the tentative pressure of the probing tongue. Their bodies touched with the violence of some ancient wound at last embalmed. And then from below he could feel the old intruder raise his head and drive the wedge between them. Trembling, severed, they drew apart in fierce concentration. For an instant he sought her eyes; he dropped them to what his hand was doing. She wore, he saw in momentary surprise, no drawers. Still but watchful, the dress rumped below her breast, she lay in all the disarray of a wounded bird. Her legs were pressed together as if she were holding a coin between her thighs. Head bent over and down, he waited in the moon's blind flow until, swept before the mounting surge, he drove his knee clumsily between the giving thighs. The girl's hand reached for and clasped the blood's true shape.

He remembered now his shame and disgust. His father had known. He would have run to him and confessed, begged forgiveness. It was too late. He heard the girl quietly sobbing and felt

only loathing for her tears. He crawled into the darkness of the shelf. When he opened his eyes, the moon had moved down the arc of the sky. The approach of day had thinned the borrowed light; its chill lay upon the ground. But the girl was warm against him and asleep, her arm flung across his chest, he relaxed now and stilled, as if listening to the world's body dreaming its myriad reflection; but the tireless blood deep in his flesh, whose channels neither the sun nor the moon may reach, the images of dream quickened. He turned to the girl and pulled her closer, and in a waking sleep she drew him down; down into darkness . . . Along the horizon a thin streak of color smeared the counterfeit sky. From pole to pole time was spreading its old dividers. Hastily he stood up. "Come on," he said. "We've got to go."

He led the way, nor did he look behind him. Once back upon the outjutting flat rock he paused. He scanned the glistening trees, shifting, resuming their shapes. She came up beside him. Any moment now, at their backs, the flaming darts would stream upon the eastern border. Leaning forward, he hurried on his way. Somewhere before them he would find the path.

Peter Legrand found the hall empty. He could not have hoped for such luck. He strode past the sitting room on the long chance she would not be there—it was too full of women; he saw them whispering with too little restraint—to the room behind and, without knocking, turned the knob and entered. At first he thought it was empty. A lamp on the washstand was turned low; all the light came from the east window. It reached halfway into the room; it stretched the crocheted counterpane until it seemed nailed to the bed. His glance paused there; it was this chill guest-bed look which made the room seem not only empty but abandoned. And then he heard it, a sigh. It was drawn from the very depths of the spirit; it broke off into a moan which could not ease. His impulse was to leave, hearing what no ear was meant to hear; but he had seen her. She was standing before the window in the stilled ease of trance, a solid shadow isolated by the broken light the moon gave.

As he watched her, he knew there could be no turning back. He would act upon that instinct of decision which had brought him so rudely into her presence. The elation of desire sinking into pity scattered all his plans. Impulsively he took a step towards her, but the loud creak of his boots restored him to his senses. Carefully he collected himself upon the poignant grace of her figure—if only she would turn her eyes.

“Julia,” he whispered.

It seemed louder than a shout, but she did not respond. He said in a normal speaking voice, “Miss Julia.” The shadow stirred; he sensed the motion as the hand reached her breast, saw the moment of hesitancy, all its courage, before she turned.

“Who are you?” Her voice was harsh. “What are you doing in my chamber?”

“To offer help.”

But she was crossing the floor—it seemed all one motion—and turning up the lamp wick. Can an oily wick show so much pallor? He was very still. He felt if he loosed his gaze, she would fall. At last she spoke. “Mr. Legrand, you will find the men across the hall.”

“No,” he said at last. “You must let me say what I have come to say.”

He had calculated as never before the hour of his arrival. He had gambled on that empty pause, after shock and grief, that comes inevitably upon the sense of relief when the body is washed and dressed and the coffin lid down, the relief of acceptance of what has happened. But most of all he knew the mind will not remain empty. Most of all he had counted on this.

“This is hardly the time for business,” she said. Her self-possession was now entirely restored. “Whatever business you had with my husband . . .”

“My business is with you,” he said quietly, and then walked over to a chair and held it for her. He had put into his step the firmness of purpose; he now said, “Won’t you sit down?” She

made no move; her regard was cool and distant. "After all, we have not always been strangers. There was a time . . ."

"Mr. Legrand," she interrupted.

"If we have seemed strangers these nineteen years . . ."

"Mr. Legrand, we are strangers. And you are in my private chamber. Will you please retire?"

"Miss Julia, I hold myself responsible for my acts. I have come to claim this right of responsibility."

"Sir, you have no claims upon me. Certainly," and he saw the barest rise of the shoulders, or was it a flutter of the neck? Was his sight so strained it made of these his hope? "Certainly," she repeated, "I have no claim upon you."

"But you have a son," he said and waited. He saw that she was waiting too. "A son who will be without inheritance."

"How, sir, can that be of interest to you?"

Her voice had dropped its cool indifference. With a fierce uplifting swell in his chest, he saw he might proceed. Scarcely knowing he did it, he walked directly to her and took her hand. "You will be more comfortable seated," he said; and when she made some slight resistance, he raised his voice. "Please allow me. It will not take long, what I have to say."

He found for himself an upright chair. He stood behind it and grasped its back. This steadied him, to put a physical object between them. "What interests me most," he said, "and has increased my wonder with each passing year, is that a marriage of so many years has brought forth only one child."

"You wonder at God's mystery?"

Her tone was almost conversational; he could not quite disguise his admiration. But he said with marked irony, "I wonder that you find it mysterious."

"And I," she said

"And you," he replied

"I find it hard to believe you could waste your time on so unprofitable a speculation."

"Ah," he said. "That strikes home. I know my reputation. I had hoped from you a clearer understanding."

"From me you had hope?"

"Hope may take strange disguises." He opened and clasped his hands on the firm wood rungs.

"What is it you want of me, Mr. Legrand?"

The shift of tone made him shift the direction of his appeal. "I want you to allow me to save Joe Cree's estate."

She gave no immediate response to this but in the dim light seemed to study him. How still their bodies were, what a violent passage their eyes made crossing, as each searching disclosed only the other's search. At last she looked away. "We will not be without a home. I have brothers."

"I well know your brothers," he said. He was surprised at the bitterness of his tone, but was given no time for surprise. He saw she was about to rise; he said rapidly, "Yes, I know you will have shelter, and food there. I know Jack's property is unencumbered. But remember. It will be your home, but not your house. For Lucius it will not be home at all. He will learn to breed mules if," and here he paused, "if he stays."

As if his words were pellets striking her, she turned her head. He continued, with increasing confidence, "I am a rich man. I am envied, but I am respected. I have the reputation of driving hard trades. I drive no trades. I pay the price a thing is worth. Worth has the most shifting and varied of contents, and I know that brother or no brother, if you go to Jack Copleigh's, you will go as a penniless relative. And so will Lucius."

She half rose in her chair.

"Please," he said. "Of course there will be nothing obvious. But suppose he fills the front parlor with cotton, as he has this season? Will you protest? You may, but how can you answer when he says it's fixing up to rain and he can't afford to ruin the cotton? The obvious answer is to build a cotton house, but once the bales are ginned, do you think he will get around to it? Suppose he wants to drink. Will you stop him? You may, but will he thank you

for it? I am offering you your own establishment. I am offering Lucius a chance to earn his inheritance."

He stopped and looked at her; at her alert widened stare, open upon the brutal reasoning he had put before her; and with relief he saw she had followed him, had followed so fast she was left no time to question his too free speech. He took a further risk; he said, "You are a sensible woman. You were sensible even as a girl. You took the advice of your brothers at another time of crisis. Now take mine."

"What," and her voice was level, although any moment her rising breast must shake it, "what is your price?"

He replied in his most businesslike voice. "In two weeks you have a note of six thousand dollars to fall due. I will pay that. In return you will deed to me your share in the turnpike. It is worth a thousand dollars a mile. I am buying it a little above its present worth. And then I will go your note for the rest, and believe me your obligations are large. You will not under the present management of this farm be able to take up your debts and the notes Joe Cree stood for. But I have a plan that ought to work."

He paused and his look was a demand. She dropped her eyes to her lap; she said again, "Your price?"

"Ah," he said. "My price?"

"Yes?" Her voice was barely audible.

"It is that you will let me advise you."

"Yes?"

"So that," his own voice was no longer firm, "I may become friends with—with Lucius."

And as she remained silent, her head lifted at this but the eyes still veiled, he felt the enormity of his daring. He had staked all his hope, and with fright understood himself, that he had relied upon his riches and that they would be nothing before her refusal. And she was capable of refusal. Why hadn't he, who had waited so long, waited a little longer, until after the funeral, until the note actually fell due, he who in affairs timed so exactly his moves? Out of his selfish need, thinking only of that, he had thrust himself

upon her, at her time of sorrow and confusion. He had let himself forget Joe Cree. He had violated the dead, not yet buried. He had rushed in to violate her memory of the dead. Nineteen years she had lived with Joe Cree, and all those years now, in her hesitation, seemed an eternity of intimacy, endearment, habit. He felt sick, empty. If she should refuse . . . desperately he sought within his being for some footing . . .

She rose suddenly and clasped her hands, then slowly paced the carpet. He almost hated her grace. She said, "I knew I had heard a ghost."

He heard his voice break, a thing so strange. "Forgive me. This is ill timed. I'll go." He could not see her surprise, for his sight was blurred. Before he could take in what had happened to him, even begin to think how he would respond, there was a knock on the door into the hall. It was a firm but careful knock.

She said, "You had better compose yourself."

Hastily he turned away, blinked his eyes and started towards the window.

"No," she said. "Don't turn your back. Sit down."

He felt he was losing control of the situation. For so long he had ruled his feelings he had thought the rigidity was all himself; and now, the unexpected, like a sudden wind rising on a still day, had caught him up, lifted and churned him about by a force long submerged which, since forgotten, he recognized with all the fresh renewal of the lost restored. He drew himself erect in the chair; he felt the severity of his glance, how frail a defense it was; but he also felt a sharpening of his awareness, as if his senses had been honed. He heard her voice say, "Come in," as the door swung open.

It presented Rhears bearing a tray with a glass of buttermilk and a plate of rolls. The room grew suddenly small. The tray seemed a toy in his hands. "This is today's churning, Miss Julia. I thought you might want a little something."

Rhears had seen him at once, but like a good servant had showed no surprise, merely pausing to look to Julia for direction, and his white coat made the black face shine with lustrous depths.

She said, "Set it on the bedside table." Of course he knew Rhears as he knew everybody in this part of the county worth knowing. He had noted particularly the efficiency with which he oversaw the gravel hauled to the pike; but now, close up, his worth showed in all its entirety. He took in the reserve and poise of his carriage as resting on far more than a good servant's training. Nor was it the self-confidence of physical strength, although Rhears knew his strength. He had seen powerful men ill at ease inside a house. Rhears would be ill at ease nowhere. His hands were not made for such trifles as trays, and yet this trifle enhanced his dignity. And then it came to him with sudden insight that any act Rhears might perform would show its proper worth, for he was a devoted man. And his devotion was to the Cree establishment. To him the house and lands must represent the permanence of things and his own self-esteem throve on maintaining, within the confines of his place in it, this order. It would not occur to him that it could be shaken, any more than that Julia's judgment or directions could be doubted.

Julia had recognized his knock, and that knock as well as his presence here, now, showed all the familiarity of habit, the small acts which succeed each other, repeat themselves, and as the seasons turn make up the illusion of a stable world. He sensed how, coming at this moment, Rhears would do more for his plea than any argument he could make. He saw it in the reflective look she cast upon her servant, now turning away from the table where he had set the tray. He was the concrete sign of unbelief in disaster to the Cree farm. His very bearing must show what a betrayal and self-betrayal it would be to let the farm go under the hammer.

Rhears waited for her to speak, but she was lost in her reflections. He waited just the proper time, not correcting her lapse, but ignoring it as if she had already spoken. He said, "What shall I put on Mr. Legrand's tray?"

She recovered herself at his words and turned.

Pete Legrand shook his head.

"Are you sure?"

"I would take a glass of that buttermilk."

Rhears gave a bare nod and regarding his mistress, "Miss Julia, we out of whiskey."

She fumbled for her keys. "Here," she said. "But I'd take the decanters to the storeroom and fill them there. Yourself," and she looked at him.

"Yes, ma'm. I understand."

"And you might bring that card table out of the hall. We can eat on that. And a small dish of pigs' feet."

He bowed and left the room. She followed to the door and held it while he brought the table in, lifted the dropped leaf and turned the top until it rested solid upon its base. Neither of them spoke during the interval he was gone. Without apology they kept their silence. It would give her time to think and him time to arrange without haste the details of what he would propose. She must no longer depend upon cotton so much; put more land down in wheat and oats; fence it better; increase her sheep; and he would furnish the cattle for grazing and the corn and hay he would buy in Missouri, and they would share the profits of increase. He would buy sound but thin cattle which the drought would throw on the market. Her back woods, fenced, would hold fifty sows. It would serve for a plan. It was sensible enough to give him time. She would persuade herself it would work because she would want it to work, and then . . . his heart gave a throb and he moved suddenly in his chair.

It did not take Rhears long to return with the other tray, with delicacies besides pigs' feet. The soft noises he made arranging the table increased the silence; and when he left, they sat down, still without speaking, and he drank the thick tart milk, spring-cooled, flecks of yellow butter floating on top. But they did not eat. At last without constraint, as if they had met by arrangement for the matter before them, she leaned slightly forward. "And now," she said. "You have a plan."

Jack Croleigh reached the drive as the carriage turned the corner of the house on its way to the back. This meant that Legrand

would stay a while. He slowed his stride. The unexpected, it always takes you by surprise because it has been there all along. But who would have thought after so many years Legrand could still be waiting to get back at them? No, he in a sense already had done that. Why try to disguise the obvious? Jack felt despair before such patience if patience it was. Not a flicker of an eyelash in this direction until now. Should he go in and overtake him? He paused with his foot on the bottom step. After all there was nothing Legrand could say or do this night, more than make his respects, if even that. He was no kin to be shown in to Julia, and too close kin to Lucius to claim it, and Lucius would be with his mother. No, he would accost Slowns. He might learn something from him.

He came up as Slowns was swinging down from the box. "I'll help you unhitch," he said.

And then, "I see you and Legrand have been trading."

Slowns undid the traces. "You could call it that."

"Well," Jack asked, "what do you call it?"

"Trading."

"Is that what he's here for tonight?"

Slowns looped the harness over the backs of the team. "Where'll I put them?" he asked, looking up and down the crowded lot fence.

"There's room on the other side the pond. It's darker there, too. Squire Drumgoole aint apt to see them."

"Squire Drumgoole aint apt," Slowns said.

"I'll throw down some hay," Jack said, "and then I'll lead you to drink."

Slowns led the horses out of the shafts and turned their heads towards the pond. "You can lead a horse to water . . ."

"I'm better acquainted with jackasses, and it aint water." He swung his leg over the rails and sprang into the lot and made for the barn, and

afterwards

in the office, the dim lamp light softening the walls, making the small room seem larger and yet in its largeness close and intimate.

The jug was on the secretary and a tray of mugs beside it. "I see John Greer has anticipated my guests," and as he lifted the jug and shook it, "or his own."

"It jostles enough for us," Slowns said.

"Say when," Jack said, pouring.

The liquor rose halfway in the mug; Jack looked briefly at his guest, continued to pour until it came to the top.

"There's room for three drops of water," he said dryly.

"I wouldn't care for any."

"No more do I," and Jack made the whiskey gulp into his mug. "But I'll just lace mine with a little. I want to keep sober to see Pete Legrand drive you away after the funeral."

Slowns saluted his host. "May the end outdo the beginning." He took several swallows.

Jack sipped and eyed him over the rim, "You are in a hurry."

Slowns widened his eyes in mock surprise. "You wanted to get me drunk, didn't you?"

"All right. I know you are a Yankee. You don't have to be so smart." And he smiled briefly, half in apology, half in self-assurance, for he had no plan. Only the oppressive sense of a thing out of hand and of having made the wrong decision in wasting time here in the study when he should have followed Legrand and confronted him. What would Slowns do for him, almost a stranger to whom he had no right of appeal and from whom, he saw at once, there was nothing to be got. He was sharp. And loyal. He would never fall into the trap of false sympathy. Jack looked into the candid brown eyes which did not waver. They showed that quality of brown which is always delusive, seeming soft and giving, but which understands too well what they see. Jack said, "Sit down. There's plenty of time."

"It depends upon whose time it is," Slowns said. "Now, Big Pete, he makes his own time."

"Yes," Jack said, looking down into his mug to interpret this. He closed both hands tight about it. "Look, Slowns, you have a reputation of keeping your counsel. But I see you talk well enough."

Slowns gave a mocking bow. "You are the man of words."

"A thing happened a long time ago. Legrand found himself at a disadvantage, but a disadvantage of his own making . . ." Jack paused at the impulse which had loosed these words.

"Yes," Slowns said.

"He's a man of sudden acts and feeling. It got him into trouble once. It might get him into trouble again."

"Oh, I think Big Pete can take care of himself."

Slowns had a pleasant voice, but Jack only heard the foreign twang. "Dammit," he said. "His money won't buy anything in this house."

Slowns waited for Jack's show of irritation to drain away. He looked straight at Jack. "I'll tell you, Mr. Croleigh. Big Pete knows what money will buy, and what it won't."

"Well, it won't buy no Croleigh."

Slowns raised his hand without lifting his arm off the chair. "And I'll tell you another thing. Money don't mean a thing to him."

"It don't have to when you got it."

"That's true enough. I know there's such a thing as the habit of money. And it's a habit hard to break, but he's like any other fellow and wants the same."

"You aint as smart as I had figured you, Slowns. It would all be simple if every fellow wanted, as you say, the same."

"We all want a home." He spoke softly into the room.

"Home? What do you know about it?"

"Were you ever in jail in a strange place and nobody to go your bail? Well, home is a place where generally somebody will go your bail. And I tried to go home. When they mustered me out, I hit the pike. There are two ways you can use a pike, go to and fro on it, or you can follow it somewhere, say home." He paused and studied his boots. "You've heard of the criminal who comes back to the scene of the crime. But, Mr. Croleigh, did you ever hear of the one who couldn't leave it?"

"So Legrand's got something on you?"

Slowns shrugged his shoulders. "I see you want to think the worst of him. No. We all commit crimes, and I think the worst ones

are those we commit in innocence. I was free to go. I set out on this government mule, one hip branded U.S.A., the other C.S.A., and there I was hoisted between. It was enough for thought, for a lad who'd come down here with that shining word, *Union*, in his eyes. And as I rode along, through the ruin and the lonesome chimneys, I said—Can a word do all this damage? And a good word to boot? Is it so hard to keep a word to its definition? By the name is the name betrayed? Or is it the deed? And that's why I didn't get home, for there comes a time when we are all strict constructionists, when the word and the deed must be one. I knew I couldn't stand bands and the bunting and Our hero's home from the wars and the Union's saved. So I said—What's left me now is to keep to the pike, and from the back of my mule riding high I'll pass through life like a parade, for one road leads into another, and the globe is round. But did you ever set your belly down in a ruined land, with money in your breeches and nothing for sale? One morning I woke in a fence corner by the side of the pike, the mule snuffing and snipping the ground as if it knew what it meant to hoard, and I lay there for a moment light and pure in the pink of dawn. The sky was immense and splotched with color and mightily indifferent, and then there they came, geese dipping their wings in the clean fresh light, honking for company's sake, and with no more care than to fly their wedges at the seasons. When I thought of all that lay around me, on the ground, I asked but softly—God, if I am made in your image, who do the birds take after? No voice replied, but I lost my enthusiasm for the parade. That was the day I came to Mr. Legrand and he took me in."

"I see," Jack said.

"So you see."

"Yes." And Jack made his voice even. "And since somehow we fail to match the word and the deed, it's best sometimes not to talk. And sometimes best not to act. You tell Legrand this."

At the top of the door there came a knock, firm but soft. Jack looked around to see Rhears. "Mr. Cropoleigh," he said, "I think Miss Julia wants you."

He was rising, he understood it all upon the instant of rising: Pete Legrand was with Julia; Rhears knew it and his sense of propriety had brought him to the office; and yet Jack, as the lamp-light gave to the dark features a blackness almost translucent, saw him in other guise. He said, "You'd better tell Dr. Croleigh."

"I has, sir," Rhears said and receiving his nod, withdrew.

Jack turned upon Slowns. "You knew all along. You let me wait here until it was too late."

"Look, Jack," Slowns replied. "It was already too late."

He left the room in such haste it was not until he had reached the hall that he took it in. Slowns had called him by his Christian name. It brought him up, as if the voice had become too common to hear, and only the echo had meaning, rebounding out of the void, the sound of self disembodied like a ghost speaking. He must know the man better, for he spoke the truth. He had known this, too, all along: that the pattern always repeats itself.

He entered her chamber so quietly, unnoticed, it seemed to him that he had come in before himself. Julia, Dickie, Legrand were seated about the table. A single candle stood up clean and pure above the disarray of dishes and broken food; but there was no ease nor a settling in the chairs from appetites dulled. They sat as if at a table abandoned by others. Pete Legrand had thrust his hand upon the cloth, as if for support. Both of Dickie's hands were crossed upon his cane, and he achieved the effect of a rigid unbalance. He was saying, "This was very indiscreet, Mr. Legrand."

Legrand picked up a silver knife. He shot his eyes along his arm and examined its blade. For a moment he thought he was putting all his meaning in the blade. He said, "I grant you my intrusion was indiscreet. I only wanted to ease somewhat Miss Julia's troubles."

"Fortunately," Dickie said stiffly, "it was Rhears who found you."

"Grief is enough to bear," Legrand went on, as if he hadn't heard the rebuke. "And I know it's supposed to drown all other troubles. But it don't, Dr. Croleigh." He looked up briefly; then

back to the knife carving designs upon the cloth. Dickie followed the blade. "It wrings us dry, only to sop up fresh trouble."

Julia was looking at Legrand, not so much hearing the sense of his words as that they were made from thoughts of her; and although his eyes were lowered, he was aware of her gaze. Already an invisible communion had banished much of the natural aloofness which should have obtained between them. Dickie's reproof, he saw, was only drawing them closer together.

"You should have come to the men in the family," Dickie was saying.

"Frankly I didn't think it was any of their business. Only I could save Joe Cree's estate. It was a matter between Miss Julia and me."

This was the affront direct, and he saw Dickie go hard and even in the dim light the color change in his face; saw him almost rise to order Legrand off the premises and yet not rise, bound by the reality of the situation, the uncertainty of his authority.

Julia turned to her brother. "Dickie," she said and her voice was full of sadness; yet it did not hesitate. "I confess to selfish thoughts. I feel the full shame of them. And yet it was not for myself alone. I am responsible for so much."

"But your good name, sister. We must think of that."

"Oh, I know," she said. "But it seemed providential. The way he came in, just at the moment . . ."

Why did Legrand keep looking at the tablecloth? Why didn't he meet Dickie's eyes? He was not a man easily abashed. He would cut up the cloth if he didn't put down that knife. If Julia could only interpret the violence in his hand; but, he saw, she didn't even notice it, the good housekeeper so conscious of her things. Nor was Legrand aware, and he understood in all its meaning why Legrand was so intent. He was afraid to trust himself to look at her. His real feelings would show and so give him away. And in that instant Jack knew he was looking at Julia through Legrand's eyes, as she appeared in all her beauty—in the black dress of corded silk she had worn to Aunt Emm's burial. Years ago that was, and yet how

little her figure had changed. The dress was tight but only seemed to make the perfect mold for her body, as if time had corrected the dressmaker's art to some final perfection, her fair skin fairer for the black ground, her hair slick in a pure severity. Damn his eyes. His own had shed full acceptance like a skin and she appeared in all the freshness of renewal. Damn Legrand. Damn jealousy, that old heart wound. Jesus, how red it pouts.

Legrand was rising. "Miss Julia," he bowed, "you know my proposition. I beg your leave to withdraw."

How formal he could be, when it didn't matter. Before she could reply, he said, "There's an angle to this we ought to take up before you go, Legrand."

They all turned to him at this, but without surprise. It was as if they had known he was in the room all the time. Their looks waited on him. "Your reputation is not exactly that of rushing to the aid of widows and orphans."

"You mean," Legrand said, "people might wonder why I do it?"

"I mean they are going to talk."

"And I will have an answer." Legrand hesitated, then, "Joe Cree was the one man in this county who treated me the same after the war as before it. Most know this. I will say I know how to show my appreciation. And it will be the truth."

"If not the whole truth?"

"The whole truth is rarely required," Legrand said dryly.

"That's so," he answered. "But you know, people lie so much, they are pretty good at knowing a lie when they hear one."

Legrand shrugged his shoulders.

"They are going to be mad at themselves for not being nicer to you. At first, that is, until somebody will remember that deer that ripped you up the belly. Folks here have seen only the common woods variety of deer, with horns that make an awful jagged wound, and mostly on dogs." He paused for the effect of this. "That miraculous deer that left a scar on you smooth as a string they will ask if any ever saw such. You know us Methodists and Baptists and Campbellites, we don't believe in miracles any more. It drained us

to believe in just one miracle, and that took place so long ago it looks almost like history. And the Presbyterians don't even believe in history. But they've got a mighty strong hold on a belief in money. They know it don't change hands for nothing."

"Oh, brother," Julia said.

Legrand's eyes were glittering. Dickie was making motions for him to hush.

"I'm not talking now. I'm not talking at all. This is what our neighbors are saying day after tomorrow."

"I don't care," Julia said in deep distress.

"I'm thinking of you, sister. But not altogether of you." And he looked carefully at each of them. "I'm thinking of Lucius, too."

Legrand stepped towards him. "And do you think people won't talk when they are dispossessed here, and go maybe to you? They'll say her sins have found her out."

"Oh." It was a low cry she made, and she rose up as if from a long wrench of pain. She rested her fingers on the table for support. She hung there, frail and spent. Legrand stepped back from before her, shaking his head, like one coming to from a blow. Dickie was getting out of his chair. The strain of her breath filled the room. They waited aghast in the full realization of what they had subjected her to. All their eyes were lowered, as if to look at her was to see their shame. They heard the small breath she took. She said, and they listened as if each word could not possibly cross the barrier of air at her lips; she said, "I will try to preserve the work of Captain Cree and his son's memory of him."

and then, "If you will excuse me, I'll try to get some rest."

They heard the swish of the silk pass between them, and then the sough of the door closing.

As if it had been carefully practiced, and the time had come, Pete Legrand's boots moved carefully in the opposite direction. They paused before the hall door; the sound of voices flowed in upon them; and then the sound stopped. At last Jack raised his head; he looked towards but not at his brother. He said, "I think I'll go too."

After a while Dickie replied, "I'll stay. She may not be able to sleep. I made a little powder for her."

Saul Slowns was idling just beyond the door. "What did you all do to Big Pete?"

Jack said, "I need a drink."

It was Slowns who led the way to the office. After the interval of silence, standing across from each other, they tossed the drinks down, not as if they were thirsty but as if they were hurriedly disposing of some amenity to get down to business.

"He came out of the room," Slowns said. "He passed by me as if he didn't see me."

"Who did?" Jack asked.

Slowns made a gesture of impatience. "Why, Big Pete."

"Ah," Jack said. "The empty eye socket. All ablaze with night, sucking the crumpled lid. Sit down."

The lamp chimney was smoking. Slowns turned the wick down before he took his seat. He waited a moment and then, "Some day you are going to say a word you'll have to eat."

"Here's to appetite," and Jack raised his mug. "Eat a word?" he asked. "That's the one thing you can't do to a word. But a word, and it spoken, can eat the heart out and leave it beating. Now aint that a remarkable thing. A little air, a little sound, do all that."

"He went by me like a man listening to himself," Slowns was slurring his nasal twang. "Or like a sleepwalker."

"Your metaphor is ass backwards. He'd just waked up. He come to bury a man, and found he'd happened on a resurrection."

"Yes?" Slowns was all interest.

"He offered my little sister to save Joe Cree's estate."

Slowns again, "Yes?"

"And was accepted." Jack's voice began to drag. "But he discovered Joe Cree aint dead no more."

"That would be a miracle," Slowns said, waiting.

"It's a common garden variety."

"You know, Jack, I'm a literal-minded fellow."

"The body corrupts but the life survives in memory. If you can keep it green. Between them they have elected to keep his memory green. Mortal immortality I call it. A happy state, a husband without any of the worry of having one, but with all the financial benefits." He looked straight at Slowns. "Legrand has sure out-traded himself this time."

He watched Slowns thinking fast. "It's been a surprise for all of us," he said. "Looks like school never lets out."

"Of course. There's the boy," Slowns said.

"I knew I could count on you," Jack replied. "Memory might fade before the right kind of man. But there's Lucius to give it body."

"Big Pete deserves better than this."

"You said he wanted a home. He's got one. Where nobody can claim kin."

"Whatever he did as a young man, Jack, he's run out of patience. He's in his prime."

"He's the old intruder," Jack said slowly.

Slowns ignored both Jack's manner and the words of Jack's speech. He rushed his own, "Look, I know him. He's not going to serve any memory—not for long he won't. He's a man who's been put off. He won't be deprived. Maybe you and I can help when the time comes." Slowns offered his hand. "Let's shake on that."

Jack slowly shook his head. "I'll shake on friendship. Not on that word help. It's like signing your name to a blank note. I know a heap more about money than I did thirty minutes ago."

"I'm not talking about money."

"Neither am I."

Slowns had dropped his hand quickly and walked over to the mantel. He set his mug on the mantel board and turned as if to go, but Jack lifted his drink. "You see this liquor? It's corn. It no more resembles corn than I do dirt."

"I get the point," Slowns said. "But where does it lead?"

"In this mug is corn come to its miracle. You drink it, it rises to the head. Everything else we put into our mouths spreads out and

goes down. The fact that it rises is proof enough for me it's no part of the laws of this world. And the morning after it'll break your head trying to get out, which is proof of the proof. But the hole wasn't put in the top of our heads, which some might say is cause enough to doubt man's being made for spiritual ends. Not that I say it."

Slowns leaned against the mantel. He spread his arms and smiled his small ironical smile. "You've missed your calling, Jack."

"I've missed more than that."

"I'll drink to that," Slowns said.

"When the first shoots of corn come out of the ground," Jack continued, "shoe-mouth deep, and the wind wavers over it a tender green, does that put you in mind of what we've got in our mugs? Or when the ear is making, do you see the grains tight-shucked beneath; or the tassel when it's fine as silk, of a yellow no gold can match, do you see the same tassel after frost, brown and stiff as horse-hair? No, you don't. And if the season is good and corn gets waist high, all greasy green rustling in the wind, and you say to yourself you made it, and if you just get the rains right, it will make so many barrels to the acre, that's a speculation, and you don't see that either. What you see is the wind of July aint the wind of May. And what you feel is the lift of a thing growing according to its nature. Not that the head don't know the ear will harden, and the time come to pull it. And when you pull it, you eat it, and the same ear could turn into a hog or a man or a mule; and yet be none of these. If an ear of corn can be so full of mystery, how can we meddle with a mystery like man? And yet we do it every day."

"Well, sometimes you can help," Slowns said.

"What part of a man?"

"The divine part. Man is made in God's image. That's the miracle."

"Man is dirt come to its miracle. That we can accept for we see it in the natural order. We see it, as we see corn grow. I don't say we understand it. But that woman came out of the side of man, that we do not see, and yet every second that ticks drops a man from the woman's side."

"Eden is a parable about free will."

"What's free about it?" Jack asked and felt his head swing. He waited for his eyes to settle; then, "The flesh aint up to much. That's the trouble. The Word it ended up flesh. But there was the beginning of a story a long time ago: Let there be light. And we've got two eyes to see it, but we can only see one thing at a time. These two blinking in my head. If they look sharp, they see too close. If they look wide, all's a-blur, like you are now, swaying against the mantelpiece. And every time sight shifts, the world dies. Man made in God's image. Maybe. But God made sure there'd be no competition. Eyesight, the world's oldest illusion."

"Salvation or damnation. That's the choice."

"Yes, I know that old song, pitched in a low sweet minor—Oh, where is my wandering boy tonight, and ending up, Polly put the kettle on and we'll all take a drink."

"And we'll all take tea."

"Where are you, Slowns? Quit disappearing."

"I'm right here."

Jack's voice broke; then drawing himself up. "Slowns, you're the blind scholar who put out his eyes reading footnotes and when he was called on to recite, cried,—The text, oh, where, Jesus, is the text?"

"I just like to hear a thing quoted right."

Slowly Jack began to beat the arms of his chair; and then he stopped; and then he began beating them again. He stopped suddenly. "If God had only slung our hearts about our necks, what a paradise this dirt would grow, the heart streaming light, the light beat all a-dazzle with love. But the heart's under the rib bars, sucking blood in the dark."

He swung to his feet and waited for his body to find its balance. Then, "Let's go visit the world, Slowns. It's all here tonight, eating to keep its strength up and drinking a little for comfort's sake against that miracle all boxed in, and sun up."

The fat pine torches pulsed like blood burning. Rising, curling thick and black, the resin smoked up the night. The mourners sat

and stood and walked carefully through the flickering glow, drawing closer to the barbecue pit, making a wide circle about it. Voices flowed back and across like some tide that had lost its shoreline. The fire had died into coals, and the coals were sinking into the ash. Suds Pilcher was testing the meat with his nose now, eyes half closed before the spiced heat rising. He moved his head like an old dog against the wind.

"Ring the bell, Suds. These folks about slobbered out," Jack said, weaving up to the pit.

Suds Pilcher glanced briefly at Jack, reached for the limber switch and dipped it into the sauce and carefully swabbed the meat. He stepped back into a long gaze and shook his head. Suddenly Jack brought his hand to his face and wiped it down. "There's a spider dropped a long way to spin its web."

"That's no web," Slowns said.

Jack raised the jug and took a drink. "Take a dram, Slowns. The night spider's bite is mortal."

"That's moonlight, Jack. You brush that off, you've done something."

"Listen, Slowns."

"I'm listening."

Jack leaned towards the other's ear. "There's as much vermin under the moon as under a bat's wing."

"Who are you kissing there, Jack?"

Jack swung around with slow stealth. He put his hand on Slowns's shoulder to steady himself. At that moment the moon went under; the figures pausing close by turned shadowy. Jack squinted his eyes. "I heard a voice. I smell a smell. I can even see the hollow eye sockets drinking shadow. But the body's not there. Just starved to death in front of our eyes, Slowns."

"Jack, you know me," the man said, abashed.

"The voice of Sam Applebury, died of a belly wound."

Others had by now come up, and the circle thickened. Snickers and one gay laugh. Applebury shifted uncomfortably; he half turned as if to go. "Laugh while you can," Jack said. "The flesh wasted down

to the voice, waiting on Suds to brown the meat. But as long as there's a voice, there's hope of the word. I will now address the voice. —Voice Applebury, if you want to get up a true bill against Suds Pilcher, claiming the crime against your belly, there are enough good appetites and true here to hang any jury. And old Judge Ewing to hold court."

"Let's try him," a merry voice called out.

"No, no," another replied. "Suds too near done. You want us all to starve?"

"We'll try him by proxy."

"Look a-here, boys. You know me. I'm starved but to no death," Sam said.

"The voice and its shadow," Jack intoned.

The crowd had increased.

"Look," Sam said. "Pinch me. This is me, old Sam Applebury."

A long figure with shoulders curved into its chest patted the air in front of Sam. "Just a shadow. Let's try old Suds for this sad sight."

They began to move through the flickering dark towards the old men seated under the hackberry tree. Suddenly Jack felt weary of the game; half turned to go to the house . . . Suds's daughters, dressed in white, moved like ghosts from the kitchen to the back lot. Other women were helping, bringing stacks of plates and silver to the long rough tables set back from the pit, with benches for eating, knocked together with a few nails out of unplanned lumber. There were lanterns and a few lamps scattered along the boards, but before the torches their glow showed as faint rents in the night.

"Hey there, Jack, come on."

He stepped forward, and was drawn into their circle.

"Judge, Jack Croleigh's got a complaint to make."

The torch on the tree to the side of Judge Ewing and his companions made the faces waver as the shadows moved. The old judge lifted dead eyes from under the creased lids. He brought out his snuffbox and carefully put a pinch in each nostril. He waited for the sneeze, and the men waited; but it did not come. He drew out

a big pocket handkerchief and blew his nose with loud snorts. He as carefully put it back and as his hand returned, it held a small leather-covered flask with a silver cap. He unscrewed it; took a small drink, said hanh, and then, with no haste, screwed the cap back and put the flask away. Without effort he seemed to scrutinize Jack, but even in the demi-light it could be seen that his eyes only gave the appearance of seeing, as if beyond surprise, they had grown flat from the monotonous repetition of what they had been forced to witness. In this blind clarity, saying in a voice trained to the minimum of breath, "I always fortify myself before I examine a Croleigh."

The old men wheezed; a cackle drowned in its phlegm, but the spectators, some young but mostly middle-aged, remained silent. The judge's person even in jest gave them the feeling of play turned earnest. They shifted in their disguises and made way for Jack to come forward. His hair fell about his neck like a cowl. "May it please your Honor, as prosecutor, I ask for a summary conviction of the culprit, Suds Pilcher, who willfully and with malice aforethought did do to death the gluttony of Sam Applebury."

"The procedure is highly irregular," the judge said. "In a court of justice the defendant is not convicted without trial."

Jack bowed and nearly lost his balance. "Saving your Honor's presence, for a prosecutor conviction is justice."

The old judge's eyes sharpened for a moment. "The facts," he said. "He must be convicted on the facts."

"For certain, your Honor, the fact is in its construction. I will now proceed to construe . . ."

"You will do nothing of the sort," the judge said and struck his cane upon the ground. "First there must be counsel for defense. Who is that man beside you?"

"Slowns, sir, a reformed criminal," Jack said.

"No such thing," the judge said. "Disbarred."

Saul Slowns stepped forward. "But your Honor, who better knows how to defend than a reformed criminal?"

"Well." The judge seemed to weigh the matter. The crowd was quiet and leaning forward. "What was your crime?"

"Fratricide, your Honor."

"And housebreaking, barn burning, mule stealing."

"That's enough," the judge interrupted. "Only the docket of a Confederate court could crowd together so many crimes. Where's the corpus delicti? You can't have a trial without a corpus."

"Bring the Corpus Applebury before this court," Jack called out.

Applebury shifted his feet. Several gave him a push. "Now, looka here," he said.

And the judge testily, "Will the bailiffs bring the corpus before this moot court?"

Two men led Applebury to the side of the judge. He tried to grin but the red glare twisted his mouth and dug hollows in his face. He stood there, a thin man except for a middle which protruded like a growth. The judge leaned forward slightly and examined it. "This swelling is about to give birth. Are there witnesses able to identify it before I remove it to the morgue?"

"It'll not make it to no morgue, Jedge," a voice said in alarm.

"Can you identify it?"

"Looka here, Judge," Applebury began. "You know me. Everybody knows me."

"Silence," the Judge said. "Highly irregular. Most improper proceedings for the corpus to speak."

"Your Honor," Jack said in a sad voice, "It is indeed improper, as improper as that justice . . ."

"Thirty days for contempt of court," the judge said.

"Thirty days, your Honor?"

"You were about to say as improper as that justice should obtain in a court of law."

"But, Judge . . ."

"Well, you've proved it. Thirty days."

"May it please the court," Jack began.

"It does not please the court," the judge said.

"May I ask what does not please this august court?" Slowns asked.

"That the corpus delicti should speak," the judge said and brought out his flask. Everybody then took a drink, passing bottles

and jugs. The older men cleared their throats, the youths shivered.

Jack was bowing.

"The court recognizes Mr. Cropleigh."

Jack bowed again. "But, Judge, saving your excellence, we open our ears to the Word and hear only the voice crying in the night. That voice which is the agency of the mouth and ear, sensible parts both, your Honor. Whereas the Word discloses itself only by illumination, and yet we are told that the word has become flesh. Because of light failure this transmutation remains unseen, except in the one instance which I will now bring as evidence before the court. I propose it was not the corpus your Honor heard but the Word itself. Stripped down, it's true, to the windpipe, freed of the flesh that has muffled it, with only the barest minimum to contain it, if indeed a windpipe is flesh at all, the Word can for once be heard even through the voice, faintly I grant you, and not by deaf ears, hanging there with its few last syllables to make its complaint, saying You know me, Judge, before it lapses into silence, in reverse action declining to the void whence it came, when we might begin to say, your Honor, that the corpus delicti has become the spiritus delicti . . ."

"Objection," Slowns called out. "No civil court is competent to try a case involving the spiritus delicti."

"Overruled," the judge said. "This court is incompetent for anything."

Jack bowed very gravely and almost lost his balance again. "The wisdom," he said, "of this court, the equilibrium of its scales cannot be too highly praised, for so long as there is a windpipe there is hope, your Grace."

"Your Honor," the judge corrected.

"Your Honor is overmodest. Let me say it is just this which is now before the court."

"The windpipe?" The judge asked. There were snickers.

"No, your Grace. The spiritus delicti. Does the court see else but shadows here? Are we not all shades, speaking shades, your Honor, due to this light failure I mentioned in my brief, which has led the defendant, Suds Pilcher, with that jealous care of all perfec-

tionists, by the skill of his art and his sauces to maintain that the flesh is the end in itself, and that by the very delays of perfection, he brings to gluttony its agony, and from the juices of the belly he raises the appetites to the semblance of the pure water . . .”

“May I interrupt the court,” Slowns asked, “to bring in fresh evidence?”

“We have proceeded from the corpus delicti to the spiritus delicti. To which does this fresh evidence pertain?”

“A knotty question. One might even say a theological one, your Honor. I will let your Honor decide. Mr. Pilcher has broken his swabbing stick, has taken his first drink, which this honorable court no doubt knows is preparatory to sharpening the knife for carving.”

The word fell into the crowd like a solid thing. It began to stir, jostling forward and back. It was not long before all faces had turned away from the chair of judgment. The men soon drifted away.

“Well, Jack, it looks like court has called indefinite recess.”

“Aye, Judge,” Jack said.

With slow deliberation the judge took snuff, and this time he sneezed. Slowly he rose and, swaying slightly into a rigid position, said, “Words help, if you can make the voice hold out. And if at night, in bed, you have the habit of talking in your sleep.”

“Aye, Judge,” Jack said.

“Now, I think I’ll go and pass judgment on the meat. It is my opinion he’s made it overdry and too hot for the ladies.”

The judge glanced at his companions who had risen and were waiting. Erect, with his cane prodding the ground, carefully but assuredly, he moved in the direction of the pit like the blind who has memorized the path. His companions fell in behind.

“Jack,” Slowns asked, “you all right?”

“Aye.”

“I think I’ll go find Big Pete.”

“You find him,” Jack said, “keep your eye on him. That’s the last piece of advice I aim to give, for I’m done with words.” And

he spat to get the taste of them out of his mouth; brought up the reek of spoiled liquor.

For once he had had too much. He would walk a spell back of the barn and restore the muscles in his legs. What a wonderful gift, liquor. It almost made you believe a man was what he claimed for himself, to think it up and make it, and all out of a nubbin of corn. Fire and water fused, for once the opposites conjoined until even dull matter showed some spirit. But it was head stuff, and he guessed he was proud of his head. Clear as a bell and light as a fart in church. If somebody would just cut it off, it would float away like a soap bubble. But the flesh aint up to it. "No," he said aloud as he picked himself up from his knees, "the God-damned flesh just aint no count, always starting what it can't finish. Can't even hold its water."

He stopped, rested his hand against the back-lot fence and relieved himself. "There you fall, counterfeit rain, spattering the ground. And all you can raise is a stench." He saw he was at the gate and leaned over to unhook it. "That's one thing you can say about Joe Cree. The only man in the county who can hang a gate, excuse me, could hang a gate that don't drag. That's something anyhow."

He walked through it and fumbled for the hook. Released from the confines of the lot, he drew himself up; took careful steps, for it seemed the currents of air, heavy now with moisture, were swirling down the heavens in a spiral draught, drawing his legs at cross-purposes. It would sure rain before light. Well, a rain on a funeral was said to be good luck. But whose good luck? For the widow, he reckoned. Julia . . . sister, wife, mother, and now widow. Untangle that blood line if you can from all those postures and there she'll be, in all herself, pure, untouched, immaculate. If you can, but the shapes keep shifting, gliding from one to the other, and you are left clutching a shadow in your fist. Somewhere she must be.

From the southwest lightning ran like an exploding shaft, showing the tobacco barn for an instant. The barn stood forth and disappeared as if it had been created and destroyed by the same

bolt. He shook his head. Was that the glow of its ashes? He lunged towards it and found himself before the big doors dragged back, leaning in like a hover, a lantern set to the ground just inside, small splotches of light escaping its glass, laying a streak on one door post, showing that and the night. Inside shapes huddled into themselves, as if from the earthen floor the ground had risen, straining to free itself from itself. Gathered around and against the walls he felt not so much the eyes upon him as sight forming, furtive, blunted by the dark, hanging to the glowing coals of the hands' barbecue, the shape of the meat above as if poised upon itself inside the air. Was it heat seen or light warm, or only scent there . . . ? Old Isaac gave him the only semblance of reality in the heaving murk as, squatting, half leaning towards the pig, he daubed it. Maybe if he went in—no—it would only spoil their barbecue. He could go if any white man could, but it would be an intrusion. "You got plenty there?" He asked. "Mister Jack," a voice spoke from the void, and it seemed his name faded before it could reach him. He turned away.

Outside the clouds had blotted the sky. How fast they could bank themselves, forming out of the upper air, layer upon layer. The moon was entirely gone and the stars, too, deep under this impenetrable moisture dividing the firmament. He'd try to make it to the woods lot and rest against a tree. He took his bearings on the lantern and behind him and off to his right the flickering yellow torches about the pit, like lightning bugs caught in some web, where old Suds was sliding the knife. Walking forward, he remembered there would be no fences in his way and the woods just far enough to restore some firmness to his legs. *That which is far off and exceeding deep*, who can find it out? Who but him, whispering . . . ? From the hard dry earth the odor of dust he kicked up hung under his nostrils, as if at that level the moisture pressed down to settle it.

The sting of dust, the feel of the ground, the bearings he had taken . . . with these he made his way into the night; but there was a movement, a swirling to discommode him, and at its very center he felt a strain, as if ligaments like the spokes of a wheel, invisible but taut, pulled from the back of his neck. He stopped and rubbed

it, felt the pain in his eyes relax. That was his trouble, the eyes pulling to see in the dark. He raised his hand; he could not see it. He brought it in front of his face. He closed his eyes and opened them; he did this again; he felt the lids touching, but it was the same dark whether his eyes were open or shut. He had entered the total and absolute reaches of the night. How long had he been walking, how far, to get nowhere? He felt a moment of fright, and deliberately demanded of his reason to tell him he was in the pasture to the west of the house, that its southwest corner held the woods lot. He had only to go forward, on the bearings he had taken, and he would find repose. He concentrated, plunging inwards to seize the two bearings, thinking hard upon the lamp and the torches, but the thought sank into the rush of the mind's depths, oh with what speed it sank only to find the images sinking faster, beyond any visible evocation he could call up. He said aloud—Lamp, lightwood torches. But sound took on no shape in the blackness to which he had come. It vanished into his breath breathing upon the face of the deep.

He found he was walking; at least he could feel the solid ground. But where now were his legs, swaying at the knees, taking him? Somewhere, at some far distance, thunder rumbled and made of the air a solid floor. Only the ear left for guide now . . . then he heard the footsteps. He moved on to make sure. He stopped to listen, but the steps stopped, also. Could it be Slowns? He seemed to remember Slowns said he would try to find someone. He turned and called his name, but there was no answer. Carefully he tried to recollect how far he had turned, to resume the direction of his passage; but he could not be sure. One step off in the dark can take you miles and miles out of the way. Behind him the steps had resumed their even pace. He moved aside to lie in wait, seize whatever or whoever it was that followed him so surely. He raised his foot and, falling, jumped into a balance . . . hundreds of little feet pounded his eardrums, their invisible surge diminishing until somewhere it stopped. He waited upon the pounding in his chest to

quieten. Then from afar, out of the pastures of the night, he heard the faint stamps of a lone beast.

It ceased; then long, long ago the footsteps resumed. They were in front of him now, and he was following their muffled sound. He could feel his sight tight shut in as in sleep; the eyelids closed upon grains as rough as dirt, and everywhere his feet trod, they scratched his eyeballs in measured rhythm. There was nothing in all the blackness but this rhythm, and he was shrinking towards it. He was helpless to resist. Lightly, at even tread, his head began to thump and gently bump along the ground. With his expiring will he concentrated upon the film of moisture beneath the eyelids, the small particles of dust moving in their particles of pain. The footsteps were approaching. They were almost upon him; and as they neared, the moisture began to steam, the grains of dirt, the dirt . . . Oh, Jesus . . .

A clap of thunder cracked the firmament; his eyelids flew open. He was standing upright before the lightning horn, piercing earth and firmament together. The ground shuddered slowly. Before him a plot of trees swayed apart. In the instant of illumination he felt he stood at a place, witnessing the world turn on its axis; but his eyes, as the light died into itself, showed him the horn upright among the parted trees, harder than granite, glistening like a shaft of salt. His eyeballs burned with a cold green light, in which faintly the horn still glowed, as out of the forehead of some fabulous beast, couched upon the earth as upon a soft and sweetly scented lap. He stood quietly for a space; felt his hand all on its own reach into his pocket and draw forth his knife. The blade snapped open and, crouching, he took a step forward. He took another and tumbled down.

With a soft thud he struck the bottom of an earthen box. As if his fall had jarred it from its moorings, the box began to move away, floating gently upon an air heavier than any known to man. His lids would not stay open. They shut upon the two eyeballs, swirling in the green of their light. They drew together and merged like two great drops of water in which he lay, still but lolling as the greenness turned its iridescent sphere about him. Here he sank as into some

swamp, a lush balance between growth and decay, life eating itself up as it grew, the rotting shine of the green-golden gloom, where nature is never asleep, nor ever awake. A growth so rich it cannot stop to flower. Everything gone to weed. What a monstrous summertime: flowerless, fruitless, seedless. The rank sap flowing out of its own secretion, the turgid leaves, the looping vines sucking the fetid air, damp, warm from the primal moisture seeping to the molten center, the heat traveling upwards as the rich slime presses down upon the rocky fires. And the sun nowhere present, only this green light inside of which he lay poised. Without turning he could see himself on each side of himself, moving into himself; but before he could merge, the slick light revolved and showed the faces now of Julia and now of Duncan but with his body, moving towards and away from each other; and when they were about to meet, met his body between. And then her arms reached across him, wavering like water, into Duncan's which were flames. Her hair overflowed him tangling in the heat draught. The fiery hands fumbling burnt the doeskin which clothed her. Their charred ashes sank down as she moved into Duncan with the stilled motion of a waterfall. For an instant the flame of him turned from red to blue. He saw the terrible suction drawing them together, as the ashes sank into the green of his vision and put it out. The heat began to drip upon him; its boiling drops spattered the gray ashes, and afterwards he felt the slow, steady descent of warm rain soaking into his clothes. From below and to the sides the smell of fresh dug earth released itself like a scent, and through his nostrils it drifted, cleansing his head. But his throat was still burning and his mouth as fluffy as a snake's. He was aware of swallowing. From some void slow voices seemed to be struggling to make words of sound. It was then he felt the weight of light. It pressed down like a stone, but at last his eyelids flickered. With all his strength he opened them. They blurred with the water running in from his face. Vague figures were above him, looking down. He blinked and sinking his hands in water and mud pushed up to a sitting position. He was surrounded by four dirt walls; the floor was an inch deep in water. Out of a mist which lay like a thin gauze

over the top, heavy drops were seeping into the pit, and the sound they made was musical, as the weight of each drop seemed heavier than water, increasing as it marred the silence. And it was this sound which cleared his head. He flicked his eyes up and out.

John Greer was squatting at the foot of the hole, regarding him. Streamers of mist passed the servant's face. It was the color of wet ashes. Moisture swelled on his forehead, as if from some final strain of attention. His yellow white eyeballs pressed forward in a strut. Carefully now Jack shifted his eyes to the legs of three men standing upon the smoking rim. Shovels and a pick were at their feet. Quickly he looked up. It was Winston, Skaggs, and Semmes. He had fallen into Joe Cree's grave.

At last Winston spoke, "You're out of turn, Jack."

With a kind of solemn levity Semmes said to his companions, "Might as well cover him up, I guess."

"Trespassing," Skaggs said.

Jack scrambled to his feet and the slick clay bottom threw him down.

"Looks like he aims to stay down there," Skaggs said.

More carefully Jack now rose up, and the moisture swathed his face like a thin cool glue. "Don't you know, boys, it's against the law to leave an open grave overnight."

"Here, gie me your hand," John Greer said. With a heave he pulled him out.

"It's not a grave yet," Skaggs said. "We've another foot to dig."

"We left it that way a-purpose," Semmes added, "knowing the bad luck to leave it open overnight."

Jack was looking wonderingly at the marble shaft of the family monument in the center of the burying ground.

"Come on, Mister Jack, you done ruint your best clothes. You catch your death standing out here."

Slowly Jack turned to follow his mulatto servant. He paused and looked back at the grave diggers. "Me and Lazarus, boys. Do you think Joe Cree can do as well?"

"Come on to the house, Mister Jack."

John was already walking away. Jack fell in behind him, nor did he look back. They walked along in silence under the gray sky, in the morning chill. The light rain had barely laid the dust. All the suns of summer lay hard packed beneath the slippery surface, but September was only a few days off. Autumn was nigh, and then winter would be . . . he shivered once to the bone, shook himself and walked on. Over to the right a flock of sheep, with their heads down pulling at the brown grass, was shifting towards the woods lot. He came up beside John Greer. "I need a drink," he said.

"You had more'n your sheer," John said.

Had it been John following him last night? Was it his footsteps he had heard? He would not ask. And what answer does the literal fact supply? In spite of the day which always turns up and into which the dreams of night fade, his dream or was it vision had not vanished. It lay hard and bright within. Its image, he knew, would not dim or fade, lying deep, core and surface one cold clear sparkling sentience. And words, which he would not speak again, as useless as last year's weather report. They did not speak again until they entered the office. A fire was going on the hearth, and on a trivet a pan of water was sizzling.

"Now take off them wet clothes," John said.

Obediently he began to undress, down to his underwear. John was with the hot water mixing a toddy. "Take them off, too. What I seen, your nakedness won't shame me."

Jack turned his back and stripped down to himself. He felt a blanket strike his shoulders. He grabbed it and wrapped himself in, and then walked over to the fire and sat down. John handed him the toddy. "Della in the kitchen. She may be have time to wash and arn you a shirt. There's your second-best clothes. And you stand back when they totes him out. You stinks worse'n a mash barrel."

Already the warm smooth drink was working deep in him, the fire was warm, his neck growing limber for nodding. "I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for you," he said.

"I aint for sale. Mister Lincum freed me."

"Well, he aint freed me," Jack said drowsily. "But maybe I'm free now anyway. Or will be."

"Don't feel so free you give me more trouble," John said, regarding him with troubled eyes, bundling the dirty shirt in his hands. "And don't fall in the far."

He did not hear John Greer go out. Already he felt himself approaching that border where consciousness grows diffuse and the senses, like one pure drop of water, gather to hang beneath the vapor's thin cloud and upon the instant, pulled by the depths below, fall and dissolve. Upon the next intake of breath, or the next, sleep would overtake him. It would bring with it this time, he knew, no dreams but a vacancy such as the eyelids of an animal, flicking shut, suspends upon nothingness. He drank the last of his toddy and, gently sighing, waited.

The rain had cut short the barbecue, but not until the meat had been eaten and washed down with what was left of the drink. It had merely prevented the feeling of well-being, the moment of renewal and the swell of talk which the flesh of the dead animal, spiced and succulent, should have brought the mourners. They scattered before the warm rain, which the thirsty air drank, so that the drops reached shoulders and heads as light as particles of mist. "Even the rain comes dry," a voice said flatly. But this did not last, and the guests increased their flight to cover, but with a reluctance to scatter, some looking back, a few heads ducking, as they made for the nearest shelter. The men drew towards the barn and covered wagons, the women and the young to the house, the old following at even pace, indifferent to the weather. A few who lived close by hitched up their buggies, saying they would go home and milk. Hurriedly Suds's daughters cleared the tables, but in their haste left everywhere disorder. Then all at once the back lot was empty. The torches darted and hissed; dark streaks rent them, and one by one they snuffed out. Within the house, after the momentary flurry of talk, the feeling of repleteness overcame the mourners. They withdrew into bedrooms, into corners. Here and there the whispers of the young

grew fainter. At last like an expiring sigh the house stood sodden with breath and sleep but not in the parlor

where the coffin sat upon two sawhorses before the west window. Beyond the drawn curtains the rain fell; it beat upon the metal roof with a low light drumming, the uneven tempo of sudden downpouring and the short withholdings of a cloud short of water, thinning into a steady gentle patter, which by its very sound told those who listened it could not last. And yet they scarcely seemed to hear, Judge Ewing and his companions, who had taken the last watch for the dead. They sat with their backs to the coffin, in a half circle before the hearth. The dark polished wood glistened in the dull light of the hanging lamp. Its patina seemed to have dissolved the wood, giving shape to the silence. The very air seemed to bank itself about the coffin, thick and impervious, confining the old men's voices to the half circle they made. With an effort Slowns withdrew his eyes and sat down beside them. They took no notice of him. He adjusted his gaze to theirs upon the dead fireplace. A stuffed peacock stood upon the hearth, its tail spread to mask the gaping hollow behind.

"Boy, how many bales the county going to gin this year? Hear Legrand say?"

The low voice came as a shock. He saw it was old Billy Creek Randolph. He had lifted his head in his direction, as if his eyelids were too heavy to move. The milky pupils seemed less to see than feel him. Slowns gave a quick answer. "Well under last year."

"Short as I figured." The old man looked back towards the hearth.

"Yes," Judge Ewing spoke up. "Cotton all opened at once. Even them who stay behind have caught up this year."

"Hard times before us," another old voice. "Short rations for many."

"Hard times," Judge Ewing pronounced. "And Joe Cree gone. We always looked to him to pull us through."

"Aye," Billy Creek said. "He always pulled. So long as you pull, you don't know you aint out."

"They say he left his affairs in pore shape."

Slowns did not know this old man. He had made an abrupt movement. He looked from one to another; then his eyes dulled and he drew back. After a long pause Billy Creek said, "You'd never know from the outlay tonight."

"She's laying him away like a Philadelphia lawyer," old man Jordan said.

"She's a managing little woman," Judge Ewing said.

The old men drowsed. There was only the sound of the rain. The walls of the house gave a loud crack. A woman on the sofa near the stairwell looked up suddenly, leaned to her neighbor and whispered. Mr. Jordan shifted. "I saw Pete Legrand take Winston and the boys on the back verandah. Wonder what he wants of them?"

"Money," Judge Ewing said.

Slowns had not thought of the back verandah. He must confess that he had not looked too hard for Big Pete. His appetite had tricked him, too, and he had lingered about eating and feeling the comfort and the cheer. He had had qualms about letting Jack Croleigh go off by himself. He was pretty drunk and the night dark, and every moment growing blacker before the rain clouds. But a little walk would do Jack good, and it seemed now that Big Pete was in no need of comfort. If he had taken Winston and Captain Cree's other friends to a private talk, it was out of that stubborn confidence in himself that no matter what the obstacles they would go down before his will. Or else, now that he had committed himself, he was set on carrying it through. Winston would come away from that talk knowing where the future direction of the county would lie. That much was certain. Joe Cree's hand to their notes was so much dry ink now. But still and all Big Pete might need him. The parlor was the right place. Sooner or later he was bound to come here. . . .

"Hard times or good, somehow people always make out," an old voice said, suddenly, as if out of some dream.

"Or they don't."

Quietly Rhears entered the parlor, bearing a tray of toddies. He went first to the judge. "Now this is welcome," Judge Ewing

said. With trembling hands the old men reached for the mugs. The one Slowns didn't know took a small quid of tobacco out of his mouth and put it in his pocket. Rhears said, "Mr. Slowns, I didn't know you was in here."

"No more for me, thank you."

Rhears went out. The old man he didn't know said, "That's a good nigger."

"Looks like a preacher," Billy Creek said. "Always did."

"No doubt he had the call," Mr. Jordan said, "but was too busy with the sistern to take note of it. He's killed three niggers over women."

"I recollect two."

"The last one," Judge Ewing said, "I didn't see how I could save him. But then Mattie lied for him."

"You can tell a lie, and it spoken in court?"

"The way he dropped his eyes, when she lied. That told me."

"He dropped his eyes."

"For shame. He had promised and fooled her."

"Ah."

The drone of their voices was making Slowns nod. He wondered how long they would go on talking. Even when they dozed, he had the feeling their ears, full of wax and hair as they were, kept open to the slightest sound. In the daylight, when everybody else was alert and going about his business, you had to shout to make them hear. Almost it seemed they had an understanding they must not let the voice lapse. The rain suddenly held up; silence blew into the parlor like a draught. From a distance a rooster crowed.

"Day an't far off," one of them said.

"Who will preach the funeral? The Bishop?"

"Too far to send . . . this weather."

"I aint seen Brother Baskins nowheres about."

"Unnatural for a preacher to miss so fine a spread."

"You forgit. It's scacely a year since he married. He be in for an early breakfast."

They seemed to be considering this.

Billy Creek looked slyly about. "I note Sister Baskins still has her waistline."

"Shorely the preacher's done found it by now."

They burst into ribald merriment, but they made no sound.

"Hush, Brother Jordan, and you an elder."

Mr. Jordan grew solemn. "Busy in the vineyard, I guess."

Billy Creek sipped his drink and set it by him on the floor. "Sister Baskins is a mighty re-fined young lady. I hear she taken the privy at the parsonage, put down carpet on floor and seats and papered the wall with Easter lilies."

"Go way, Billy."

"I an't seen it, but Cripple Jim told me. Says it's the finest privy he cleans, and so much lime the blue-bottled flies git downheartened."

"A privy is a privy," Judge Ewing said. "No matter."

"Well," Billy Creek said, "I hope he don't preach too long. These young men always give you a ten-dollar sermon."

"True. How true," Mr. Jordan said. "The Bishop now, you can time him by the second-hand on your watch. If it's a big funeral, he just puts in more Latin."

Judge Ewing rose slowly and walked to the mantel and set his mug down. He took a step as if to go back to his seat, but he stared instead over the heads of his companions at the coffin. At his delay the old men, one by one, looked up. Slowns felt some secret communion passing among them. At last, moving more feebly, the judge crossed the foot rug to his chair. The others sustained him with their eyes. He spoke no word, nor did they. Afterwards they drew a cordon of silence between them and the coffin. Almost at once the air in the parlor underwent a change. As if it had been drugged, one old head, then another, dropped to its beard. Their black hats tilted forward, shielding their faces. Slowns felt his own head grow heavy; his eyelids drooped. He must not go to sleep, or he might miss Big Pete when he came. He fastened onto the peafowl. There it was in all its splendor. How had he not noticed its proud domination of the room? The beak was slightly open. It had been fixed

to simulate that instant which ends its harsh shrill cry. The small head was turned directly towards him. This was strange. He should be seeing it in profile, but the two glass beads which served for eyes were looking straight into his. They were cold. They stared out of a round vacancy, glistening above the slim purple neck. And then a film flicked them dull. What trick of vision was this? . . . the fragile topknot as delicate as some swamp flower seemed to quiver. The purple breast swelled. The slender quills shook out the feathered tail, curving like the dawn sky. Hundreds of eyes, veiled in every color, filled his vision. The colors blurred and spread, spreading, rising in rich oriental array, until dizzily his head began to swim, falling and rising upon an endless purple sea. And then, in pain or ecstasy, plunging out of the purple waters, a strident cry broke into the empty sky, dying as it rose, it died into a live bird. Above or beyond, at a distance, he heard the flap of wings.

He was sitting erect in his chair, trembling as if he had been plunged into an icy bath. His eyes were full open, and yet upon the instant fading he was aware of his sight straining both in and out; or as if it were turning inside out, and he somewhere in the hiatus between two shifts of time, but two different kinds of time. And then everything blurred: there he was in the familiar parlor. Upon the hearth the stuffed bird presented its dead, motionless self, smaller now, a little moth-eaten. The lamplight, too, had faded. The air smelled thick and fresh, cool from the rain, and upon it sifting through the open doors the pungent smell of coffee. One nod, one, and here was day. The old men, he saw, were still asleep.

He took all this in not separately but together, but it was only the ground, the frame, for what pre-empted his sight. Even as he grew stilled, he knew he was seeing what he had expected, what had brought him here. Pete Legrand was standing just within the threshold which led from the dining room. Lucius was beside the coffin. Each stared across at the other as if he had been surprised in an act no eye was meant to witness. The boy's face was drawn; he looked sullenly but persistently at the older man. In the dim light the difference between their ages had diminished.

The boy's drawn features suggested age; the older man's manner was hesitant, almost shy, like a youth suddenly embarrassed. It was the boy who broke the quiet, speaking low lest he wake the old men. He said, "I came to be alone with my father."

and waited

Legrand, too, waited as if he had not understood. There was the sense of timidity and need, so strange a thing for him, which made its appeal. The boy showed no sign of receiving it. "Your wish," Legrand said, "will be granted." He looked from the boy to the cherry coffin. It suddenly lost its luster. "I, too, had hoped to find a moment alone by this," and he turned to face Lucius.

"You, Mr. Legrand?"

"Yes. I. I owe a father much. I came here to reaffirm my debt."

"You? Owed father?"

"More is owed him than will ever be paid."

Lucius regarded him in disbelief. "But, Mr. Legrand . . ."

"It is not money."

"But what then?" The boy took a forward step. A glint came into Legrand's eyes. They seemed to be at opposite ends of a line. Carefully Legrand tightened it. "The debt is one that sometimes falls to a man to owe another."

Lucius waited. "Yes, sir."

"At one time Captain Cree and I were enemies. Let us say that Captain Cree made me feel that, despite our differences, I was a man as he was a man."

"Oh, he was like that," Lucius said eagerly. "He was wonderful that way. I didn't know you felt this, too."

"You've never given me the chance to let you know."

"But . . ." Lucius raised his hand to his brow; he shook his head as if to clear it.

"Now," Legrand went on hastily, "I want you to help me discharge this debt."

"Me?"

"I want you to let me let you earn your inheritance."

Lucius seemed at a loss. "I . . . I."

"No doubt you thought I had other reasons for coming here tonight."

The boy recovered himself. "Frankly I did, Mr. Legrand." Tears blurted into his eyes. He turned suddenly and put his hands upon the coffin top. He dropped his head. Half muffled by emotion, he said, "I let him down. When he needed me, I let him down."

Swiftly Legrand crossed over and stood beside him. His hands were kept at his sides. He opened and closed them, but his voice was calm and slow, "You will let him down, if you refuse my request."

"If I only could." Lucius's turn and voice were impetuous; and then, seeing Legrand so close to him, he dropped his glowing eyes.

"You can," Legrand answered, "and must."

"But, how, but how?"

"It is very simple. I will back you."

Lucius looked squarely at the other, as if he were just seeing him for the first time. His voice was low, "You would risk your money on me, Mr. Legrand?"

"All of it." His voice seemed a caress, but Lucius did not hear.

"Me?" He repeated.

"You."

"But me?"

"It will be a living monument to your father."

"Oh," the boy said, and the word sighed itself away.

And then in a tone as tired as a sleepy child's, "But how?"

"First there is the timber yet to cut."

"The timber." And then, "Oh."

"You can double the crews." Legrand's voice was matter of fact. "There will be many idle this fall and winter. They will need work, with this short crop. It will be a public service."

"Papa would like that."

"He will like it."

One of the old men shifted in his seat. Man and boy started as the chair creaked. "This is not the time to speak of this. Nor the

place," Legrand said swiftly, whispering now. "But I want to assure you I mean what I say. Let's go find a more private place."

Tears were rolling unashamedly down the boy's cheeks. Angrily he wiped them away. He seemed not to know when Legrand hesitantly raised his arm and, tentatively, put it on his shoulder, nor feel the firm pressure which set him in motion. Together, in slow step, they walked out of the room, Legrand a little behind and masking Lucius.

How long the old men had been awake Slowns could not know, but as the space beyond the door emptied itself of man and boy, as if the gaping hole had eaten them, Slowns felt his sight charged with a multiple vision. What he saw, and he had the sense of them lifting in unison, turning in unison, and in unison halting—was the black hats holding level, and the old eyes all level, fixed beyond the door.

"Now I've seen it all," Judge Ewing said.

His voice released them all. In broken movement the heads looked away from the door. Mr. Jordan stirred the phlegm in his throat. "That Legrand."

"I thought I'd seen it all," and Judge Ewing's voice quavered, "but you can't live long enough."

"Rob the dead. That's what he aims to do," Billy Creek said in a fury. "An't there no way to hail him into court?"

"I've sat on the bench for forty year," the judge said. "It's my opinion the real crimes never get tried there."

"The dead just aint got no show. No show atall," Billy Creek said.

"The quick aint got much, with a man like Legrand around," Mr. Jordan added. And he spat, "Grave robber."

"I've heard," the one Slowns didn't know spoke out, "he's got some legitimate claim on that boy." He wheezed, "Git it. Lee-gitimate."

"Hush, Matt," Billy Creek said. "You keep on dipping snuff with all the old women of your acquaintance, no telling what you'll hear."

"I don't dip snuff," he said testily.

"You aint able to do anything else."

"I chew tobacco. I don't dip snuff."

"Quit gossiping like an old woman then."

"I don't gossip like an old woman."

The two old men were facing each other, jabbing their beards.

"Old Mattie Lea, with a snuff stick and sunbonnet."

"My name, sir, is Mister Matthew Donelson Lea. And I want you to know, sir, that where I roost, I crow." He threw his head back and crowed, but his voice broke.

"Cackle. Cackle. Cackle." Billy Creek flapped his arms.

And then the voice, "Don't get up." It was followed by a rustle of skirts as Suds Pilcher's middle daughter, Molly, came into the room with a tray of coffee. She waited for the old men to see her, and lowering her voice, "Don't get up." And, "Cream? Sugar?"

"Both, please ma'm," Billy Creek said, suddenly quietening.

She went from one to the other, leaning slightly towards each. "Cream? Sugar?" She came before Judge Ewing.

"Black," the old man said. "I always take it black."

Slowns had quietly gone to the west window and drawn back the curtains. He was standing there, as the sibilant rustle gliding away from the old men made its passage to him. "Coffee, Mr. Slowns?" He saw her dove-gray eyes, how beautiful they were. They looked at each other and then away towards the gray light just beyond the windowpanes. The day, colorless, lightless, did not penetrate the room. It lay against the glass as if it had spent all its strength to reach so far. But that strength, Slowns knew now, would grow, reprieving all, growing and spreading here and everywhere . . . slowly the man and girl turned to each other. Her cheeks were aflame. She quickly dropped her eyes, clattered a cup. "Yes," he said, "if you will drink a cup with me." He had outspread his hand. "But not in here. Let's go away from here."

They turned and walked away from the parlor, from the coffin, the old men who guarded it. Their heads were bent forward, as if in flight.

The Night Sea Journey

Lucius swung wide, to avoid that one spot in the woods. When he took charge at the sawmill, he had had Sol Leatherbury point it out. "I don't want to see it, the tree that killed my father," and Sol had looked out of his blank face, had nodded. Since then he had not had to think as he skirted the fatal place. His feet merely took him around the stillness there, the seeping gloom which tainted the air like a noxious presence. Yet he always felt a constriction in his chest, as just now, and that told him. It was always lurking if not in his thoughts, somewhere to surprise his feelings. Today it served to sharpen his sense of what he would do. There were only two weeks left for cutting the timber. In two weeks the contract his father had made with Aunt Amelie would run out. He would have gone on, day by day into the day when it was all over, but there was Sol, saying there was just time enough to cut the big white oak. Sol brought him up against it, what he had ignored as he set about earning his inheritance, forgetting that time always runs out. For him his father had taken the long chance; but it was he, Lucius, who was to know how long a chance it was. With the trees still standing, the trees that would never be cut by him.

He could say impression had crowded upon impression so fast he had been drawn along like a swimmer caught by the boiling current of the spring flood, dodging this tree bobbing and turning, only to miss a chicken house, to see the suck ahead and barely pull around it into unencumbered water, when the bank seems near enough to reach, and he pulls towards it; but the legs are no more than straws; the arms rise and fall, and the spot he had picked goes

by. His eye seizes another and another until the moment comes when his motion is all a stillness, and it is the banks which pass. And that is the terror of the flood, when perspective is lost and from beneath out of the turgid water rises up that cold grip about thigh and groin.

But there's always the will to still the mind; say every flood has its eddy water. His will was harder now, but how that hardening had taken the joy out of earning his inheritance. And how much of it had he earned? That was the real question he would have to answer, when he got to the grove of white oak. There was calm there, and repose. He could think. How grand the trees were, too beautiful to cut. He had said that once to his father as they had cruised the timber together, and his father had looked at him with a quick reappraising eye, as if he had suddenly shown a hidden flaw. That's what he felt at the time. He wondered now if his words had not cleft to some deep place, some moment of choice his father had found hard to make and had made with that brutality of decision which is the price of success.

he had not thought of his father for weeks!

And his father only a few months in the ground; the grave barely settled. He said aloud and quickly, in a whisper, "When I have done it, father, then I'll think of you all the time." He was being too emotional about this. He looked around, to see if he had been overheard; but there was nothing but the trees that were too small to cut and the quiet. It was the sight he had had this morning of Lost Creek out of bounds, almost up to the floor boards of the bridge over the pike. The feeling he could be trapped here. People were wondering if the bridge would hold. Well, that was Mr. Legrand's worry now. He owned all of the pike. But it was a strange sight, to see the water rising out of itself, a tumbling violence overspilling its banks and the skies blue and clear and plows in the nearby fields doing their spring breaking. It had been raining all around for days, back in the hills and at the edge of the

county. How strange for the spring torrents to come ahead of the rains.

Slowly his footsteps resumed his path through the timber, except the path followed only out of his memory of the place he was going. He was leaving no trace here, no sound even, only a twig breaking now and then. His boots sank into the moist ground as into a fine carpet. The dead leaves gave before his weight; they rose slowly behind out of the rich loam, surreptitiously, wiping away his footprints as he made them, as if to show how light a mark a man left. The great tree tops lay here and there, as if thrown from on high, tearing a hole in the roof of the woods. And the light came down like rain shadow. The stiff branches all stood at the wrong angle, a few dead leaves curled in final clutches about pockets of air; the air all a brown stain within. His father had cut over this part of the tract. His father's word had made this change in nature. His presence lived in this act. Memory of him in the head. Oh, if he could only keep them together . . .

he turned his head to correct his position

How dry the ground that September day he and Mr. Legrand had first come here together. They had walked a little ways in, but Mr. Legrand was no walker. He had smiled in his sudden way, "It's all yours, Lucius. See what you can do with it." How wonderful those first few weeks. He had been like a visitor then, and the mill crew had worked as if to entertain him. And old Leatherbury went his methodical way felling trees. He had been foolish enough to think they were doing it for him, when the outfit was merely running on the pattern laid down by his father.

That could not last. But how slow he was to catch on. A hand would turn up late; then another. Never the same hand. He spoke to them. They always had good excuses; were polite. Smiles passed, for much of his irresponsible delight remained. In his ignorance he still thought he could earn his right without the sorrow of earning it. The mill's output fell and old Peter began to grumble. So one

day he fired the hand that turned up late. Things improved a little, but it was hard to do, to see the sullen betrayed face; he felt at fault. And then he was ashamed of this softness. But he was hurt, too, that they could be so indifferent to what it all meant to him. The little hurts remained, healing to toughen him. But are you ever tough enough?

That day the crew delayed in its shelter when the sudden shower had passed over and they should have come back on the job. Old Peter was moving about with his heavy ease, tightening the grease cups, not looking at him but over his shoulder towards the shed where the hands were. This reproof angered him, the more so because he knew it was justified. Both Uncle Peter and Leatherbury had been taking a superior fatherly attitude, going their way, not paying too much attention to his orders. And now perversely Peter had thrown it all on him. The moment had come, and he knew he had to do it, but would the old man obey? He took a breath; he felt the words thin on his lips, "Uncle Peter, you go tell that crew if they aint here in five minutes not to come at all." And he waited. The last of the rain was dripping off the mill shed. Each drop sizzled as it struck the boiler. The old negro went on tightening the grease cup. With his father's watch in hand he said, "All right. Thirty seconds is gone. You have four and a half minutes to get your crew in place." His eyes were fastened to the slick watch face; the second-hand shifted with annoying regularity. He could feel the pause, old Peter looking up from under his down-bent head, deciding. "Four minutes." Then in the penumbra of his vision he saw that thick round back turn; heard the impudent sigh as the sawyer walked away. Was he leaving him with his words? How empty and still the mill was. Nothing but the little hisses dropping onto the boiler. How long it seemed before he heard the crew running and shouting to each other. He had no real trouble after that, and he thought bitterly but with relief at his authority recognized in the noise of the pulleys and the steam putting how it had been with his father; how it could never have

arisen; further, his father could never have imagined such a situation arising. . . .

But you never earn anything once and for all. You have to gain it every day. You are never secure in any accomplishment. This, too, he had had to learn, and it was an iron-cold day in December last when Sol Leatherbury presented himself for teacher. He saw the woods boss coming towards him too fast, but he didn't take it in until Sol got close enough to show eyes red and bleared as if he had just come off a drunk. He stopped, breathing hard, the gray whiskers stubbling his face and drops of moisture frozen to the hairs of his nose. He stood there, without recognition, saying, "I quit."

"Quit? But why?" Like a boy refused.

"A word.

"He said a word I cannot abide. Nor waer it only the word he flung at me. I cannot boss the woods when any red-headed son of a bitch will fall a tree withouten my say, anywheres he taken the notion and splitting the tree as liable as not. And with no care to the lengths of the logs he cuts. Three good red oak they split, the hands Pete Legrand sent in here, calling themselves timber cutters. If aer a one ever seen a tree or pulled a saw, I suck aigs. Taking no care for what they do, riding the saw, and jackrabbiting amongst the timber for the easy cut. Hit is no way to fall timber. I spoke to him, and he jobbed that red beard at me. He answered me with a rough mouth. I put him over a log and taken down his breeches. I picked me up a scantling and beat his ass into his belly. It is no way to boss a woods. It is a worry to the mind. I cannot work for two men at once. I do not know who bosses this outfit. Is it you or Pete Legrand I do not know."

Sol leaned over and caught his nose between his two fingers and slung the snot. It struck the toe of Lucius's boot. Slowly he wiped his toe on the hard ground. It gave him time to control his anger; then, "You're the woods boss. Boss it, if you think you can."

"Oh, I can do hit, when . . ."

"Well do it then. Mr. Legrand was only trying to help. If you don't like the hands he sends in here, get hands of your own."

He did not look away until the face before him resumed its wooden expression, and he knew he had won; but what he had felt, when Sol went away, was the chill of a narrowed recognition. He had known Sol since he was a boy, and Sol had known him; yet all the older man had brought to the interview was the hired man and the hirer. It depressed him, but it showed again that at any moment he might be called on to assert his authority, or lose it. It showed him, too, his dependency upon Mr. Legrand. The favorite words of his benefactor hovered there before him, *The hand that gives is above the hand that receives*. He had just proved it with Leatherbury. He would have to get to him first before the fired hands got it all garbled. Was he proving it to himself? Mr. Legrand's hand was certainly above his. Did he feel it too much, or was it merely he did not want to be an affront to his benefactor; say, I just want your money, not your care and thought for me in these services which do not serve. It would seem like ingratitude, taking the backing as a matter of course and going his willful way. And it was not so! Could you never be what you are? Or show in its true way what you felt?

when Mr. Legrand always paid out his word with his deed. To think of the personal care he had given to the farm, advising his mother, explaining with such patience the advantages and risks of their undertaking, for Mr. Legrand never discounted the risks. And when the two barns went up, he watched the job himself, kept the men moving. And always the little smile playing at his lips. Would the smile play when he told him? Are you come into your inheritance so long as you have to explain your actions to another, no matter how kind and generous that other can be?

He remembered now how cold it was that December day he had set out to find him. He was not at the gin. Saul Slowns said he had gone to the farm. At first he felt a reprieve and then a vague disquiet. Mr. Legrand was always at the farm, it seemed, and what business would take him there in winter? Of course he had

advanced a lot of money. He would naturally want to see it spent wisely. He had thought he would meet him returning, but as his horse beat out the hard pace on the frozen pike he knew better. He had pushed the animal through the cold bleak day, until he began to smell he was pushing him too hard; but he did not slow down until they came in sight of the home fields. They lay all tight and bare in winter's rime. The cabin doors were tight shut in. The smoke from the chimneys rose straight up, thin and blue, into the frozen air. Not even a dog in sight. He and the horse might have been the only creatures alive in the world. Sensing the warm stall, the horse picked up its stride, the iron hooves ringing out the wide silence into which all things had withdrawn. A hand was standing in a wagon throwing hay among the huddled sheep. A lamb kicked up its heels; grew still, as if it had made a mistake. It all seemed no more than a soundless reflected motion.

In the barn he rubbed down his horse and fed him; hunted up a blanket fumbling out of a sense of urgency, so that it was a shock to stand before the parlor fire and feel his fingers throb in the warm room, where no fire was ever lit except for company. Then she had been expecting him? He felt a vague unhappy distress, and then the warm room made him drowsy; he gave in to it . . . the bright gay voices brought him, swaying, to his feet. "Mattie said you were here," and his mother's cold lips touched his cheek. The chill which still clung to her clothes made him shiver. He smiled sheepishly as they bustled about, taking off wraps and chatting. He had never seen her more beautiful. She looked so young, like a girl anointed with womanhood, cheeks flushed, her eyes as bright as glass. And then he took it in that she was no longer wearing black.

Mr. Legrand lifted his coat tails to the fire and stood there with the ease of one long familiar with the room. "Well, Lucius," he asked, "how are things at the mill?"

"All right, sir," he replied quickly, and blushed.

Mr. Legrand had scarcely heard him out. His mother interrupted to say the lambing was late. He had thought she did this

on purpose, for she'd made much ado about him leaving her. It had taken both his plea and Mr. Legrand's to convince her. Of course she was not convinced. She had merely given in and with not too good grace. Wasn't there, she had asked, enough for him to do on the farm? As Lucius listened to her that afternoon, in the warmth of the parlor, it appeared he was not much missed, as she went on about how most of the lambs came in the coldest weather, and what weather they were having, the worst winter in years, and how she had had Rhears make a warm place in the hay for the ewes but even so some of the lambs, she knew, would freeze. Mr. Legrand watched her lips as if each word were a golden coin for him to collect, and she addressed him as if it were all theirs. Lucius felt he was an intruder in his own home. All she was saying was what anybody knew. From the lambs she skipped to the sows, how they had got ready for them too late and it would throw the litters at the wrong time, but oh how good to have the corn and hay from Missouri. What a helpless feeling in the dead of winter to be short of feed. And did Mr. Legrand think they would come out on it all right? If only the cattle and shoats brought a fair price. And Mr. Legrand answered her, confident and soothing and she would pause to listen, be reassured. How could anybody know what the price would be until market time?

And then his mother interrupted herself, "Peter, throw a log on the fire." And Mr. Legrand, not even looking, leaned over and tossed one in, straightened up as the sparks clicked and scattered above the flame. This freed him. He said, "Mr. Legrand, I had to fire those so-called timber cutters you sent us."

In the silence—he'd got their attention at last—the gas popped out of the end of a log, hissing in the fireplace.

"What? What?" His mother said.

"They wouldn't take Leatherbury's orders." But this did not seem clear to them; and as they waited for more, hating himself, he spelled it out. "I had to do it or lose my woods boss."

His mother began to scold: he should have consulted Mr. Legrand first; Mr. Legrand had so much more knowledge of business

than he; he'd been to such expense . . . when Mr. Legrand interposed. "No, Julia, the boy did right. Decision can't always wait on consultation." And she, "Oh, are you sure? Son, I do so want you to do well." And Mr. Legrand, "But, Lucius, it's well to remember that no man is indispensable, not even your Leatherbury."

The words returned to him now, in the April woods, with all the force of being freshly renewed in the sense he had of too much time passed. The woods had darkened as at twilight. Instinctively he looked upwards and through a break in the tree tops saw the clouds scudding as before a high wind, and below among the leaves and buds the branches stilled and waiting. Unawares the rain clouds had at last moved in. Perhaps his decision would be taken out of his hands. He told himself this as he went down the long rolling decline, liking to believe it, knowing better . . . his footsteps recoiled and he came to a halt, alone and abandoned, as the silence enveloped his person like touch, piling up around him in its steady drift, invisible, at once soothing and charged. No bird sang. Nothing stirred. He narrowed his eyes; yet he saw well enough the brush and laurel and the slim limbless saplings as thick as a wall, behind which, like a solid gray shadow looming from on high, the first great white oak stood before him in all its sovereignty. He took this in and, like a boy nearing base, skirted the thicket, found the gap and entered.

He did not slow down until he was free of the stiff and tangled growth. He made a small lunge, suddenly free of what bound him and, without breaking stride, walked unimpeded over the deep floor where the great trees ranged, ponderous and quiet. Their great trunks stood, exuding a silence to muffle sound, while drifting down the yellow-green of the high tops a mist of perpetual dusk fell upon the air. What ear could hear in such a place, where the crack of doom would resound only in their falling? Reverently he went from tree to tree, pressing the soft smooth bark. His eyes closed the better to take it in, what he felt, as at his finger tips he touched the exhalation of eternity.

So at first the intrusion was no more than a wavering pressure upon his hearing, as if someone had tossed a rock into the air and made it ripple. But soon he heard all too plainly the slapping of the vines, the scratching and tearing; but he did not hear the footfall of Sol Leatherbury as he bore down upon him. His eyes opened upon the shaking brush; and then Sol's hand tearing a way through, the small buds and tender leaves breaking to fall to the ground in front of him. Sol's head was up, already measuring the trunks. Each shift of the eye cut them into logs. He went by without greeting. The flat gray eyes had a roundness which Lucius had never before noticed, and they were moist. He let him make his rounds; waited for him to come before him, standing apart in the deepening light, all a brown shadow, one long stain of bark. Sol said at last, "Thar's a hundred thousand foot of timber here, and hit'll mostly quarter saw."

"I'm not going to cut it," Lucius said.

His words had no more effect than would falling leaves.

"The time is scarce," he added, "but I've figgered it. I can do it."

"No," Lucius said. "We'll cut the gum instead. It's close to the mill."

The woods boss's eyes flickered once. Their depthless gray leveled upon Lucius. He waited as if he had not heard aright. But Lucius gave him back a look as level as his own. Sol swept an arm stiffly toward the timber, "Why all that gum aint wuth six of these here oak."

Lucius almost smiled. Only once before had Sol in his presence showed any feeling. "You are right. But it's going to rain. The wagons would never pull the load they would have to pull out of here over sobby ground."

Sol moved his head slightly, as he would when blocked by leaves, but what he showed was that he knew Lucius was right and that it was he, himself, who for once had abandoned calculation. He could not give it up, "This white oak, quarter sawed, will make a showing on what you owe that man."

"It could," Lucius replied, and this time coldly and reasonably, as if he took pride in arguing against his own interests, "if we could get it out. The rain might not even let you cut it, much less haul it."

"Oh, I'll cut hit," Sol flung the words, angry now and baffled.

"No, you'll cut the gum, if you cut anything. Besides there's a fourth of the timber standing, and so what's the difference, with only two weeks left and maybe not that."

The woodsman's hand shook as he wiped his dirty sleeve across his mouth. The lips hung slack for a moment; and then his face turned raw with cunning. He leaned forward, "Go to the widdy. Offer to pay for more time." His voice grew conspiratorial, "She aint fell out with you. You can pay off Legrand to where he won't have ye by the short hairs."

Sol waited his turn as he saw Lucius waver, for Lucius had already thought of this. Once he had mentioned it to Mr. Legrand and Mr. Legrand had told him it would do no good; Duncan's widow was best left alone. She had no love for the Croleighs. But now he wondered if in his eagerness to get done with the timber and back home, he had not agreed too readily. "Legrand for sure has worked you," Sol resumed. "He got the pike, and the lumber you've cut will just about put the price of the farm to where it's worth the price he'll have to give fer it. Unless you aim to go back there and farm hit, whittle hit down to a clear profit for him."

"Mr. Legrand is not trying to take the farm," Lucius said, but his voice was unsure. It came to him, as he watched Sol in his ill-disguised scorn, that he did not know how much they owed Mr. Legrand. He had asked his mother once and she had put him off with, "Too much."

"Hanh!" Sol spat. "Hit's no business of mine. I'm paid to cut timber. Long as I'm paid, I'd as soon cut blackjack." Slowly he began to turn away, "I'll put the crew in that gum Monday morning."

"Wait," Lucius said. He paced up and down the grove a few turns, not to think but to give the pretense of thinking. Sol dropped

down upon his haunches and watched. Lucius dropped down opposite him. "If I could get Aunt Amelie to accept a reasonable figure, it would pay me to move the mill to this part of the tract. But I don't know whether Mr. Legrand would agree."

"Hell," Sol said, and his voice was almost warm, "the bank'll loan you on what you've cut."

"Mr. Legrand has advanced me on that."

Sol picked up a twig and began marking in the ground. He looked up, "You aint signed no papers."

"There are papers enough. But that's not the point."

Sol threw the twig away; said with authority, "Go see her. A body never knows. She mought not ask much." He leaned slightly forward and winked. "You favor your Uncle Duncan right considerable."

"Uncle Duncan. What's he . . . ?" He broke off to look sharply at the other. What could he mean except the obvious; and yet Sol's voice and manner, that leering wink was the very travesty of suggestion and strangely moving. But suggesting what? He said hoarsely, "What's my Uncle Duncan got to do with it? He's long dead."

They were both standing now. For answer Sol began slowly to inspect him. Growing in the flat gray eyes and wooden face was the sense of some discovery. Lucius felt all the discomfort of the lifting mask and what showed behind it, raw human curiosity. The older man gave the impression of seeing him for the first time, and yet Lucius felt he was not looking at him but at some other. He felt the persistent gaze peeling him away from what he had known himself to be, while his raw flesh showed something strange and new, which the flat gray eyes took to be Lucius Cree. "You go to the widdy," Sol said with a familiarity he had never shown. "You've growed. It might not cost you a red copper cent."

"All right," he said. "All right, I'll go," as if this encounter had melted his will. "But you get your ass into that gum."

"Shore. Shore," Sol said with alacrity, already turning to go. "They winding up on that little patch of poplar now."

And he was gone, with the haste of one who fears to be called back. Lucius was left alone, but could he say now with himself? What had Sol seen? He could not have seen it unless it was there to be seen. Was it that the hard work, the open air, had given him a final stretch of growth, brought him to that appearance he would take for life? Had he passed at last that unknown boundary between boy and man, that invisible but potent change? He shook his head vaguely. Sol had seen more than that, and he had responded with more. His own breach of the rough decorum, to be friendly but never familiar with those who work for you . . . never would his father have put an order in such a way. "Get your ass into that gum." He said it aloud again and wondered. Sol had shown him nothing, and yet he knew something had been lost between them, but was something gained? How explain his feelings? He felt lighter, fuller, more confident, as if he had thrown himself forward, out of any chance of return. The coarse sound of the words, and this was the wonder of the wonder, was pleasing to him. They had appeared as had his decision, instantaneously, so that he had the sense of not reaching but receiving something long prepared and only waiting for him to set in motion. But what? As he waited for an answer, he felt the first drops of the long deferred rain. There was no time left for debate. He must get on his way before creek and river rose, the bridges wash out and leave him trapped in the woods, to wait on time for his decision. No, the decision, whatever it brought, must be his. As if at its behest, he hurried now from the grove and, with head slightly lowered towards his haste, walked back to camp, as overhead the raindrops sounded large as nuts among the tree tops.

As he rode away from the mill, it was raining; but he saw soon enough that it was not the rain they all were expecting. He left it behind about two miles on his way. His spirits grew lighter each mile he traveled. When he pulled up his sweating horse in the quiet fence corner, before his own fields, his taut eardrums softened, bathed by the tender air. The plows tore open the dark moist

earth. The ground made a soft ripping sound, as if it were cloth in the hands of a seamstress. It was a sound, he realized, he was always hearing, coursing his veins which the noises outside might suppress but could not silence. He threw his leg over the saddle horn and let his body sink into its restful belly curve; watched the dirt fall back from the mold boards with the lift and curl of waves, in rapid continuous motion, rising, turning under to break into clods and crumbs the color of dried blood. The gees and haws of the plowboys, pitched to the mules' ears, low but businesslike, died away even as they floated into the stillness of the April day.

It came to him, with the surprise as fresh as the day itself, this language man and beast spoke together, as the oldest tongue, yet always new. Only the land was older. Everywhere the dirt lay underfoot. Lose title, it was there. Owner and plowboy might exchange places: the land received either indifferently. And in the springtime a man had only to set hand to plow, for debt, mortgage, taxes to seem as far off as dying. But the seasons turn, the onsets of the weather come as unpredictable as a fractious woman, as any woman—then care, drought, worry, flood, the constant sorrows of stunted growth and weedy stalk show spring's elation what it renews: man to his travail.

Farming is man forever making his last stand.

In this country it is.

The last team in the gang came heaving up to the fence row. It struck him, that familiar sound. It was like the heavy panting of the ground, rising under the team's belly. As a boy that sound and the plunging chests of the mules had frightened him; and he had shut his eyes, for it seemed to him nothing could stop the straining nod of the long black heads plunging forward, unless the delicate legs bending at the hocks should break and sink down into the furrows. His father had said, "Steady there." . . .

He did not know this team now coming towards him. It was a young one, sweating too much, chewing the bit, trying to spit it out, and the green slobber foamed at the tender mouth, pinked with blood. He thought to speak to the hand about the bit; changed

his mind, for the mouth must toughen, the trace chains gall the sides; that was the way it would be, whether he said anything or not . . . the hand turned his team and, as the mules bumped together, lifted the plow and quickly scraped it with his foot, his little toe oozing through a slit in his shoe. Plowman and team all of a color. Dirt color. But the plow point shone bright as polished silver. The hand bobbed his head towards Lucius. Who was he? Some new boy? Had Mr. Legrand hired him? He frowned. The team swung into place, the boy almost running, leaning forward, the lines about his neck dangling loose in a rhythm as old as life.

The four plows, now in echelon, moved away from him down the long field.

Lucius lifted his eyes beyond this motion which seemed to negate all motion and took the whole land in. An even light streamed through sky and earth, rested in the distance upon the hairy fringe of woods bounding the clearings. In the next field two miniature farmhands were standing in wagon beds spreading manure. They lifted the forks with the same throw they would sow grain with, only a slower, heavier pause as the tines plunged into the rich heaped pile. Spring was always at a stress; yet all here went at measured pace, as if there were no crisis, as if every muscle were not strained to get the fields in shape for the planting, before the rains came, without which there could be no crops, but which could throw the crops late, even too late.

Looking at these people so intimately engaged with his land, he felt the draw of jealousy. It was they who really owned the land. Their feet trod it. Their eyes were forever bent to it. He could never know it as they did. For him it must remain in panorama, while each day, each hour of the day the crops grew out of their eyes. This evened things up some way. When he first became aware of the inequalities, the injustices of station, rank, and the raw brutalities common to life, he had wondered how tenants could be content working land not their own, or live in the small cabins, always in some disrepair. Now he saw it; the scales slowly fell from his eyes and he was given the clarity of an immediate impres-

sion: the tenants did not look on their quarters as he did a house. In some old primitive sense a roof and walls was shelter from the elements, and shelter was shelter as bread was bread. It was as simple as that. And the more of them that crowded together the better they liked it, so long as they could keep dry and warm and lock themselves in against the terrors of the night. Their sleep was a pause merely between plowing, dropping seed, hoeing, and gathering. They lived in and by the dirt as instinctively as they breathed. And the women were no different from the men. They kept their yards swept bare, to bring the dirt right up to the door sill. It was as if the floors of their cabins, raised inches from the ground, were raised too high. Girlie, Charlie's wife, had swept the chimney down once. . . . And if they had flowers—they always grew luxuriantly—they were planted haphazardly as by seed cast from a wind. They felt no more responsibility than the sun or the weather for what went on. Their days of rest were gay and free, like children's. Left to themselves they would make a truce with nature, grow only the day's need, let the rest of the farm return to the wilderness. He had seen such farms with thickets growing up around the best patches of land. The owners invariably lived in town.

The loss of actual touch with the ground, the care and worry of the farm's keep; that is the price paid by the owner for his deed. As a boy he had wanted to learn to plow. His father had not exactly refused; he had put it that you can't do it yourself and order it done: the hands will grow slack and careless, lose respect for you. "I'm a good farmer," his father had said, "and I've never had a plow in my hands." Did his father feel the jealousy too, and the deprivation? There was the time he had traded for old Alabama, the cow he was so proud of. He had walked around her, his eyes shining, the spit drooling at his mouth, telling the points of the trade. If eyes could touch, they did that day. Suddenly, like a man abandoning himself to temptation, he pushed the milker away, took the cup, laid his head in her flanks and milked about a quart, his fingers running from teat to teat in a rough caress. As

abruptly he got up and, not looking, held the cup away from himself. The milker was extra polite and extra knowing as he squatted again to his work, with the calm and sureness of a man tending his own.

Did not all distinctions lose themselves in the different services of a common occupation? But Jeff, what of him, who both owned and worked his land? Since his marriage to Ruthy and since Aunt Nanny had traded her shares in the pike for the old Tilford steading, and the spring, he had seen little of his friend. The whole family was now reunited and had moved up the Peaks of Laurel, into the old family house, and Ada Rutter into the tollgate. It was a long hard way to visit; but he had ridden up there a couple of Saturdays, to find Jeff rather formal. And he looked fleshier and older, a family man already settled out of any memory of his youth. His head, he saw, ruled the house. He deferred to his father, but it was for manners' sake. Yet it was not change which had altered the intimacy between two friends. It was the recognition that now their lives could have little in common. He was a bachelor and could enter Jeff's house, but it was the women who made all the difference. He could not imagine Ruthy in his mother's parlor. As if to make this plainer, with some embarrassment but making sure his meaning would not be mistaken, Jeff warned him to leave his sister-in-law alone. "For," he had said, "you don't aim to marry Ada Belle." In the pause, both their eyes to the ground, he had smothered the affront, for so he received it, the suggestion that it was possible for him to marry a Rutter. He had been seeing her over Saturdays and Sundays, and particularly after that trip to the farm to tell Mr. Legrand he had fired his men. He had not gone home for a month out of pique, not saying, not even thinking but feeling, he saw later when Jeff spoke to him, that if his mother could spend her days with Mr. Legrand, he could spend his evenings with Ada Belle. It spiced his pleasure. And when she was with him in his shack at the mill, somehow he forgot that she was a Rutter. She appealed to him more, was in a way more comely than many girls thought fit matches for him by his mother. But after that last climb to the

Peaks, for when he and Jeff parted he knew it was forever, out of respect for Jeff he stayed away . . . except for one more time. It was in the false spring that so often comes in February and he found it dead and lonely at the mill. On impulse he had ridden to the tollgate. She had gone with him to his shed room with a naturalness which both pleased and bothered him. She was so natural as to be almost casual about it; and yet that was not the word either. Maybe it was that she never showed or felt any shame, maybe that was it. She had cooked his supper that night, had swept his floor and later, under the stars, with the chill of the night in the air to turn his head, he had thought recklessly how it would be if they could go away somewhere, where nobody cared who they were. The next morning his thoughts scared him. In the daytime you return to your upbringing, for family belongs to the day's business. He made up his mind never to go back, but the mind works in its own way . . . at the saddle horn memory was rising to mock him. Quickly he slipped his leg into the stirrup, kicked the horse and loped towards the house. He would bathe, change clothes, go right into town and get his business done with Aunt Amelie. Maybe he could even slip in without his mother knowing. . . .

A hair pulled sharply. He stood up to ease it. *He's got ye by the short hairs.* Damn old Sol. The old hairy bastard allowed to nobody a disinterested motive. What kind of man was he? How did he fit in? He liked and did only one thing, drop trees and cut them up. Was this not the opposite of what had just seemed the proper occupation, which justified all the differences of station. Sol never planted anything: he only gathered. No, all of the picture was not clear in his head. Maybe Sol was right, or partly right. Maybe Mr. Legrand was not entirely disinterested. But certainly he did not have to spend his money so freely, nor his time, if he just wanted the farm. He could have bought that in. That was a fact. To hell with Sol. He had anyway spilled his words like buttermilk down the well. They were beginning to make his benefactor stink. Why had Mr. Legrand dissuaded him from going to his Aunt Amelie? What

if she had fallen out with the family? His father had known how to deal with her. Well, he would too. If she agreed to give him time, he would confront Mr. Legrand with this. And get the actual sum of their obligations clear in his head. That would clear the air. He had too long left this to his mother. It was not a woman's business, running a farm. It was his, and he would make it his business. He had to know where he stood.

Things were less simple than he had thought they would be that daybreak—how long ago that morning now seemed—when he had stood at the window in the loft room at the tollgate—could it be only seven months ago?—and yet he still felt able to do such things! He had plunged in his ignorance into sawmilling; now that he was away from the mill, he saw he had not done too badly, not too badly at all . . .

the horse swerved at the paling fence which shut in the kitchen garden

What he saw made him catch his breath. It was his mother but never the mother he knew frowning over some household chore, scolding him or the servants, rising in the morning scattering directions, so that it had seemed to him the day began with her voice and ended when it ceased at nightfall. What his sight took in at the instant of impact, in her familiar figure, was a presence rare and strange. In front of the asparagus bed stood her canopied chair. She sat upon it like a queen, all in white, except for the small black slippers which just showed from beneath the hem of her skirt. Out of her lap spilled a quilt she was piecing. It shimmered in all the colors of the rainbow. Some trick of light made the colors seem fluid, and she moved the needle delicately in and out, as if she feared to stain her fingers. A light straw hat woven to a curving brim shaded her face. The care she took of her milk-white skin he well knew, but what he saw seemed more than vanity. What stood out above all else was that the sun touched her nowhere directly. Its shadow glided from the canopied top like a train at her feet; it

crouched against the shade which encircled her. Upon the garden it fell hot and direct, powdering the earth with a brown dust, brightening the rows of lettuce and peas. The whitewashed fence dazzled his eyes; the white beehives hummed steadily, as in and out the bees darted like pellets of gold through a thin smoke. Serene, her head bent slightly to her work, she seemed to be listening to their wordless monologue. He watched with despair the intensity of her self-absorption, knowing he would forever be denied access there. That inner communion gave her outward look the appearance of a harmony with all about her, all that went on on the farm, all flowing from and returning to her, its center. How could she show such invincible composure, withdraw so from the facts of her situation, their plight? Everything they had was in pawn. And yet, irrational as it was, he took such assurance from her, such a feeling of elation, the mission he was on began to seem almost unnecessary. But to make it real depended upon him. And in a flash he saw what it was he felt: she was alone. He had come home and found her alone, with no Legrand to be always reminding him of what they owed.

She lifted her eyes towards the far corner where Crippled Jim was setting beanpoles; and then, as if sensing some intrusion, her glance shifted slightly, almost idly in his direction. She froze like a bird, gasped, half rising from her seat. "Lucius! What a fright you gave me."

"Me, mother? What were you thinking not to hear a horse come up?"

"Never mind what I was thinking. Don't you ever scare me like this again." And then, "Is anything the matter?"

"No'm. I just came by to change clothes. I've business in town."

"Jim, take his horse. . . ." She was gathering up her quilt and walking towards the gate. He followed by the fence. Her rapid voice made his pace seem slow. . . . "And Jim, then come back and finish sticking these rows. If you run out of poles, cut the sassafras behind the orchard."

Crippled Jim leaned crookedly into his bent hip, the nondescript

hat shading his face. He had shown Lucius an insolent leer for greeting. He did not reply to his mother's orders, but he would carry them out. He couldn't stand the negro. He was a rogue, stealing as a kind of right. His father had told him not to set foot on the place; and yet he was always here to whitewash the fences and work in the garden. His roguery seemed not to bother his mother . . . he was probably eating in the kitchen now. That was a curious thing about women; he'd never seen his father lose his temper with his mother except over this old cripple; and she with an irrelevancy which drove her husband in speechless fury from her presence, saying, "Well, somebody has got to clean the privy. Jim will do it for me, unless of course you want to."

He threw the bridle over a board in the fence. "Just take the saddle off and rub him down," he said, raising his voice, not waiting for a reply, not expecting one.

He walked beside his mother towards the back of the house. He said, "Why do you fool with that rogue of a Jim?"

"I need him in the garden. Rhears seems never to be able to spare a hand when I need one. Besides he's crippled. . . . Why, you are damp."

"I rode through a heavy shower."

"The streams are out of banks. Peter is worried about his mill. If only the rain will hold up for the rest of the week. We are so behind in our breaking."

"You are always behind," he said with a light irony.

"We've such a big crop this year. We'll never get it out. But you'll soon be here to help us. I'll be so glad, son, to have you home for good."

She had under cover of the talk been glancing shyly at him. He said, "Is anything the matter with me?"

"You've grown so," she said hastily.

They walked through a long moment's silence. The back verandah was bright and the yard more orderly than he had ever seen it. "I see you've been painting."

"Doesn't it look nice?" and giving him no time for reply, "I'll send Mattie to the office with some hot water."

"The office, mother?"

"I've moved your things in there for the present."

He sensed he should not ask why. She turned away towards the kitchen, "You'll find your clothes in the cupboard."

Now why would she put his things in the office, with all the room to spare?

She might as well have given his clothes away, for certainly they didn't fit him any more. He could scarcely breathe; his greetings would be short and formal, else he'd rip the cloth. It made his step light and smooth, as if all his flesh, which indeed it was, was tight held in, lifting him somehow out of himself. He'd heard clothes make the man; well, they'd remade him, he thought, as he stepped into the back hall, sinking into a giving softness. A few steps and he realized what it was that was amiss: the click of boot heels on the bare floor boards. In dismay he stopped and slowly looked about. The hallway was carpeted! The walls papered, and down the stairwell dropped a corded chain, holding a lamp under a red glass shade. Slowly he walked through the soft muted light; even the late morning light seemed changed here. He turned instinctively towards the open parlor doors, feeling nothing so much as that he walked through an old and familiar dream. He had dreamed this dream, of the house furnished in rich hangings and white and gold paper and druggets into which he sank up to his anklebones. And the dream had flooded with a sense of well-being, of the moment before repletion, and yet at that moment he had always awakened into the denial of its illusion. But now he did not wake; it was he who seemed illusory!

His mother was bending over a small coffee service. Feeling his approach, she looked up. They regarded each other across the distance. She seemed to be waiting as if for some honored guest, well known but long absent. He had not a thought in his head as he went forward, but a sudden shyness. And she, too, showed

it. It went between them like a current he could feel, almost touch. As he drew near, no ghost could be walking more quietly, and it was almost as a ghost that she seemed to be seeing him. Her fair skin had turned transparent, as if the blood had drawn away. He stood before her. He could only lift his hands for explanation.

Her voice was low. "We kept it for a surprise for you."

"We, mother?"

"Peter and I."

He waited; then, "Peter?"

"Yes."

That name brought him back, as if it were the very agency of reality.

"Aren't you rather free with Mr. Legrand's Christian name?"

She ignored his question and handed him a cup of coffee. Her hand was not quite steady. "Sit down," she said, and he drew up a chair and carefully took his seat.

She regarded him a while, but she did not reach his eyes. "You'll have to have new clothes."

"How well I know it."

Quickly she looked him full in the face, and away, lifting the coffee pot. "You are all Crophleigh. It was quite a shock to see you so . . . so grown."

"I come by it naturally enough."

"Of course," she said and stirred her cup. Then brightly, "We should have killed the fatted calf. But here's the end of a ham. When I'm by myself I only scrap around for food."

He ate and drank in silence. Carefully he chose his words, "All this is magnificent. I'd hoped some day to do over the house . . . when we could afford it."

"You don't know what it is to live in a house all lathes and bare. I'm in it so much. I feel it more. It was like living in the hollow of a skull."

"But, mother, with all our debts . . ."

"This didn't increase our debts one bit," she said hurriedly and sought his eyes with such earnestness.

"Where did you get the money?" He spoke severely.

"We owe it to Peter."

"We owe him too much."

"No. No. You don't understand. He discovered that lumber inspector, what was his name?"

"Schott."

"Yes, Schott. Well, he pretended that Cousin Joe—I mean, your father—had sold him that last barge of lumber, and he was practically trying to steal it. Peter got on to it. Apparently Mr. Schott was disloyal to the people he worked for as well as to Cousin Joe, and Peter stopped it. He saw to it that we got what the lumber was worth. He suggested I take the difference and do over the house."

"The difference?"

"Yes. Between what Mr. Schott would have paid and what it actually brought. So you see," she said gaily, "it didn't cost a thing. And now we have a proper house."

He looked sharply at his mother; then dropped his head to hide his exasperation. He might have expected this from a silly woman, but she knew what was what. She'd always been a good manager. As a boy if he wanted a lump of sugar, he'd had to earn it, picking berries or gathering fruit, or some such chore. And she ordered things with such care, at least in the house, so that they had always lived, he saw it all, what he had taken for granted, bountifully yet unwastefully. How could she believe the nonsense she'd just spoken? He lifted his head and what he saw only increased his bafflement, for her eager gaze awaited his approval and praise. He said petulantly, "Mother, how can you say it cost nothing. You could have put it on our debts."

"Cousin Joe would have wanted it. He looked forward to this day."

"Which he never lived to see," he said bitterly.

"But it was he who did it, really. He cut the lumber, you see."

Lucius blurted out, "Why do you call father Cousin Joe and are so familiar with Mr. Legrand's name?"

"You know I've always called your father so. He was so much older. All of us did." And she added, "Habit, I guess."

Suddenly he felt pity and shame, for her whole manner was a defense and an appeal. He was doubly shamed, for he felt pleased in spite of himself with the furbished house. It was if the finished interior had somehow given a solidity to their precarious situation. "But it's not all habit," he said aloud. "Unless Mr. Legrand is becoming a habit with us."

"I believe you are jealous," she said and blushed.

He gave a strained laugh, "Well, maybe I am, but . . ."

"He has saved us, son." She leaned forward to emphasize her words.

"But what of me?" he asked, feeling again all left out.

"Oh, you've helped."

"Only helped, mother? Don't you see I have it all to do."

"All?" She was nonplussed.

"Of course. We've only shifted the debts to Mr. Legrand. I'm on my way now to ask Aunt Amelie for more time. To cut the rest of the timber."

He had risen; he had not meant to tell her, knowing she would try to dissuade him. But he had not been prepared for what she would show, rising to her feet too, but slowly, as if his movement compelled her own, but at such a distance it took a long time to affect her. And then he saw her grip the chair, in anger or fright, he could not tell which. "No," she said. Her voice was harsh. "You must ask nothing of that woman."

He waited, spellbound by what she had revealed in the tone and the twist of her mouth as she said *that woman*. What she had revealed, and it was all the stronger for the mystery of it, was something so private to herself that her son saw not his mother but an anguish and a hatred and almost the smell of fear it was so strong in the room. But she quickly recovered herself. She said calmly and yet it was a calm which sharpens the very edge of crisis, "You must not go to her, and you must not ask me why I ask this of you."

"But how not ask? When you have shown so much, you must show me all."

She reached him swiftly. She laid her hand upon his arm. "You must not ask. I can only say she has been unlucky for all of us."

"But how, mother? How?" They were leaning towards each other. His voice had echoed hers.

"Duncan, the brother I loved above all, married her. He died. Your father had dealings with her. He died."

"And you are saying . . ."

She turned her head to escape his frozen glare, and his heart drew back out of pity for her, in his shame, but his voice went on like a file, rasping, in a momentum not of his will but out of some autonomy of breath, "Why? Why? Why?"

"She's a witch."

"Oh, mother," he said.

"And besides," she went on, and the reasonableness of her voice was the hardest to bear, "It's not necessary. Our share of the pike paid the mortgage. Most of the lumber money has financed all the improvements, has carried us over the winter . . ."

"The notes father went on, you forget, mother."

"No. No," she said quickly and almost laughing. "Come," she said and took his hand and led him to the loveseat, as if they were of an age and had quarreled, and it was now all to be made up, and explained. There was such a turbulence inside him at her manner, no mother but a woman using her charm, her appeal, but now so mechanical and strained, for the voice was the echo of a girl's, the face that of a woman no longer young. "Mother, mother, be yourself."

He dropped his eyes, watched his breath. She went on, "You see, Peter is making them all pay their own notes." Seeing him about to interrupt, "Wait, wait. He is so wise in business, and he has the cash. He says cash is like a billiard ball. You hit one and it sets them all in motion, and they end up in the right pockets."

"That takes skill, and luck."

"Oh, you have to have skill and luck, too. Oh, yes, the skill. But he has it, you see. Larsen Semmes's gin was in bad shape, for he had a coal business in winter and he has so many kin and so many friends and they never pay him. Well, Peter bought an interest and made him pay that on his note, and he made those who owed, those who could, pay up or give notes. It's all businesslike."

"And he'll end up owning the gin."

"No, only fifty-one percent. And Bob Winston is now farming half his land himself, and he looks so much better. He's really working. Everybody should work . . ." She paused for this profound truth to sink in. But Lucius looked away. Through the tight cloth he could feel her skirt touching. He crossed his legs. "And so that's the way it has been going. And it will all turn out just fine."

"But this can go on for years," he said.

She took a deep breath. With relief he saw her features resume their familiar shape, all the tightness scale off like dead skin. He wanted to take her in his arms, say he was sorry, but he was stopped by such a sadness that looked out at him. "Son, all things go on for years. Patience or resignation. You have to choose. Those with responsibility learn patience. You can't look back. The decisions of spring are not those of summer. I know it's hard for the young, who feel only spring . . ."

He smiled now, as he interrupted, "You talk like Uncle Jack." And then, "Where is he? I haven't seen him in months."

"He's been gone ever since the funeral. Trading mules in South Alabama and Georgia. I think he's like you, trying to get money for us. But it is strange, the way he went away, without saying goodbye. John Greer told me."

It was strange, strange that he had not missed Jack before; and he couldn't say why, except that what they had just gone through had peeled away the veil which he had dropped between himself and the deep unease of the mystery of his father's suicide—there he had confessed it, what he had refused to remember, if only in the voiceless thought, oh, but how loud that can sound—and what

he saw with such clarity was the mystery behind the mystery which he had to probe, to be himself. Was that his real reason for going to this aunt nobody ever saw, the family's bane? He had been a coward? He would be a man now.

Slowly he got up, and slowly, almost in contiguous movement his mother rose beside him, looked at him questioningly. He looked, saw reflected in her eyes the resolution in his own. "Mother, I can't go on for years being owned by Mr. Legrand. Whatever his motives, good or bad. I'm going to Aunt Amelie."

She looked at him long and gravely, as if her sight contained all her senses, and they must touch each part of him, as one does to the beloved who is about to travel into a far country. Her quiet regard, its resignation, almost made him give up. He leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the cheek. The clove she kept in her mouth made him sway and, as he had done when a child, he felt his head sinking to her breast. But she put her hands upon his shoulders, said with so beguiling an appeal, but so firmly too, "It's too late to go into town now. Spend the night, and you can get an early start tomorrow. I've had nobody to play house with, since it's all been done over. It's no fun alone, son. Nothing is any fun alone."

He felt he could not deny her. He was about to accede to her wish, when the knock was heard at the door. It was a gentle knock, but it rang. "Yes," his mother said.

They turned to see Rhears standing in the open door which gave into the dining room. He was dressed in his field clothes. "Mr. Lucius," he said, "I put the carriage horses in the old phaeton for you. We needing plowlines and plowpoints. And Miss Jule, he might as well bring some hoes while he at it. All these new hands we short of hoes. Rain be here foe night. When it let up be no time to go into town."

His mother bowed her head. He thought she would never lift it again, lowered in that finality of assent before what has been all along foredoomed; and yet to Rhears, who could only see the seasonal stress, it must have seemed no more than a distraction usual enough. For an instant he saw her through Rhears's eyes; then

he knew he must get him out of the parlor. "I'll get them," he said briskly.

"I put your slicker under the front seat."

"Thanks."

Rhears looked at them both, now aware that something was amiss, and quietly withdrew. So it is that it always happens, not the big feeling but the small usual thing or word that discloses the inevitability of an action. He had almost given in. Plowpoints and plowlines, the necessary objects of his inheritance, had brought him back upon the course he must follow. "You see, mother," he said.

Slowly she raised her head. She made no sound. She showed no expression, only blankness. "Yes, go," she said. But it was no voice he recognized. The room in the country manner shaded by blinds and curtains had already darkened further from the clouds which had rolled up between the sun and the bright spring day which he had found when he got here; and yet as they stood opposite each other, it seemed to him that already they were in a twilight of no place, and they were fixed there, no longer mother and son, but creatures lost to each other in a gloom into which they were forever vanishing. "Go," she said. Her voice had such a sound that he felt if he sought the lips which had uttered it, he would turn to stone.

But it was not until he reached the door opening upon the verandah that he heard the groan, rending, expelling what it had rent. He still heard it, half running down the steps. He crossed the drive, struck his thigh against the wheel as he jumped into the driver's seat. He unwound the reins. The horses took up their slow fat walk. He slipped the whip out of its socket and slashed them across their hides. They gave a leap, startled out of all habit, as down the drive the phaeton rocked upon its whirling bouncing wheels.

Spoiled and full of oats, never having been touched with more than a flick of the whip, the horses almost ran away. At the mile post just beyond the farm he managed to bring them under con-

trol. He leaned back against the seat, his arms all atremble, empty of feeling, except a dull heartache growing into an enormous bruise inside him. Fences, fields, houses and barns he knew so well passed by. His eyes reflected what they saw; they did not convey. He felt like a man going two journeys at once, one part of him watching the other go along the familiar pike, the other taking a blind course from which he knew he now could not turn aside. At the edge of town it began to rain.

He bought the hoes and plowlines. People turned and looked at him curiously, as he walked through the downpour as indifferently as through a fair summer day. He bought fresh clothes. He put up at his Uncle Dickie's boarding house; learned the doctor had gone to the country on a case and would remain overnight. He sent a note to his Aunt Amelie, asking to wait on her the next morning; received the reply that she would expect him at ten o'clock. He put the team in a livery stable, ate supper, and went to bed. The storm's entire fury beat upon the roof and walls. He lay in the bed indifferent, except at those times when, either starting from sleep, or flooding the vacancy of his waking moments, the image of his mother as he last saw her stood in his eyes, all her abandoned pitiful isolation accusing him. Then he would turn into the pillow, and after a while the night would blot her out, and there was only the thunder and the gusts of wind making the house tremble.

The next morning was as full of moisture as a cloud. He drew up to his aunt's gate, hitched, and stepped onto the old brick walk. He took out his father's watch. It was five minutes to ten. He listened to the loud drops falling from leaf to leaf, or down the air cold and growing as they fell. Into this weather he passed, through the straggling box hedge lining the walk, as into a rain raining inside a rain. A drop struck his face and his bones went cold. He took a deep breath and resumed his way over the slippery bricks, carefully missing the cracks all green and pouting in moss. He hesitated before the formal porch; the door seemed locked and forbidding. The blinds were shut and dusty. He looked hard at this, so strange a sight after a storm. It was no common dust.

Ground so deep into the wood, it overlay the shutters like a sealing lacquer. For a moment he wondered if he could have mistaken the house and then took the steps in his stride. Without pausing, he grasped the bell knob, cold and slick as a nest egg, and jerked it back. Far back in the house the bell tinkled, faltered as the silence muffled it. He felt a wild impulse to turn and run, but he had scarcely removed his hand before the doorknob began to turn

the door sagged over the threshold and stopped, partly opened. He could make out nothing behind it; then, leaning around, a small gnomelike face appeared under a dust cap. It did not speak. His senses rushed back, as blood into a member that has gone to sleep. The negress said, "She specting you."

He stepped into the dead air of the hall, into the smell of dust and rats and old mold freshly working. "Step into the libary," the negress said. "She be along."

It was a long room and a filtered light. The blinds were shut here as in the front part of the house, but the shutters were open. A small fire burned on the grate. On the west wall which he faced an enormous mahogany bookcase took up all the space between two windows. It had heavy drawers at the floor supporting glassed-in bookshelves. Its middle was a secretary, the writing drawer open and full of papers. Above that, in an alcove, stood a small marble reproduction of Mercury. Slowly now, more carefully, he took in the details of the room, as if its appearance might tell him what to expect. The chairs and sofas were arranged in a stiff formality which any such room would show. This he took in as he received the sense of some subtle violation to the solid and traditional mahogany, as if some humor of the air had ruffled it. But it was not the air. Turning now to the fireplace he met—he must have seen it in his first rapid glance—to one side, behind a card table, a hatrack of golden oak standing in all its vulgarity and out-of-placeness. Upon its tall back curved the brass hooks. Not a coat nor a hat did they hold!

Slowly he walked to a chair which faced it and sat down. The chair had been placed he felt with a curious unease, as if to con-

concentrate his attention upon the hatrack. The chair, he felt, was not needed for that. Only to see it was to be lost in wonder. As he watched it, slyly the lock in the door clicked and he was upon his feet. Squeezing through the frame was the figure which he knew must be his Aunt Amelie. She looked nothing so much as like a tremendous purple silk bag stuffed with cotton. For a moment he thought she had got jammed; and then she stepped forward, the floor shook, and she bore lightly down upon him, as the window frames shook and the prisms in the candelabra tinkled furiously. She came to a halt in front of him, and the room suddenly seemed very small. He looked into eyes round as a doll's and with a doll's bright constancy. Ringlets curled over her forehead and down her ears. The skin showed through the rice powder like splotches of dough. Her chins rolled down her dog collar like a punctured goiter. "Yes, I'm fat," she said. "But I've the bones to carry it." He had never heard a more beautiful voice. It was clear and without being raised filled the room. She extended her hand abruptly, and he saw he was meant to kiss it. He gathered himself together and took the swollen fingers, leaning over them. They glittered with diamonds, and the nails, he saw, were dirty.

"It's too bad we are not kissing kin. You are so like my Duncan." He felt as transparent as glass before the sharp intelligence of her stare. "But a Duncan tamed, cut down to size." She sighed then and turned away in a portentous kind of grace and went to the hatrack and sat down. "You needn't stare. Of course this is no place for a hatrack, but I think too much of my chairs to use them. But flesh is a great comfort to a widow. And a protection against snakebite. Sit down, young man."

He could only say, "Yes, ma'm."

The small negress was placing a tea tray on the mahogany table before her. "That'll do, Ossie," she said and began to pour. She did not ask Lucius how he liked his tea, but put in the sugar and the lemon and the hot water, stirring it well together. It was a strange way to make tea, all backwards, but then everything about her was odd. She talked as she stirred. He made himself

attentive, overwhelmed by her presence but in a way elated, almost relieved. Surely there was no harm in her monstrosity. "For the United Daughters of the Confederacy," she was saying, "I serve blackberry wine and cake. That's going the limit with those girls. But dessert at tea time makes the breath stink. Quite appropriate, don't you think?" And she lifted her chin for a moment.

"Er . . . ah," he said.

"Trying to resurrect a corpse. I tell them Why keep defeat fresh in memory. When you're whipped, it's best to go off and lick your wounds in private. That's the way animals do, and they get well if they don't die. We can learn much from animals. Oh, how your Uncle Duncan knew them . . ." She broke off to pour the tea. "Now," she said, holding out a cup. With alacrity he went towards her and took it. "Take a gulp; then sip," she commanded.

He obeyed and, puzzled, lowered his hand. "Why this is . . ."

"Whiskey. Good old red eye," and her laughter vibrated the room. Her flesh rolled and shook. "It's my little joke," she said. "There's nothing like a hot toddy on a spring morning. Beats sassafras, you'll admit. Fat and red eye go so well together. But I always feel it's common for a woman to drink like a man. Teacups and pots make it somehow more elegant . . ."

He was laughing, too. "Well, here's mud in your eye, Aunt Amelie."

"There'll be no mud in my eyes, young man," she said and looked straight at him.

He lowered his head before this rebuke.

Lucius did not know what he had expected to find here; some sinister presence perhaps, but it was certainly not this amiable, fat middle-aged woman with the beautiful voice and eccentric ways. And yet, in spite of appearances, he could not help but wonder if there were not something false in her laughter, the social amenities which reached out too quickly to set him at his ease. That was just it. He was not quite at ease. Was it that he was still seeing her through his mother's eyes, the eyes of hate and fear, he could only call it that,

at the thought of him being where he now was, in his Aunt Amelie's library, drinking toddies on a spring morning?

He shook his head slightly. "You won't have another?" she asked.

He said quickly, to cover his lapse, "Why, yes, thank you."

"One for manners; two for the hostess, and three to leave on," she said and put all her attention upon the mixing.

He got the point. "Aunt Amelie," he said, holding the cup in both hands and sipping the warm tart drink.

"Take it away from your mouth, so I can hear. Not that I'm deaf, or blind either. Or ever had mud in my eye but once."

"Yes, ma'm," he said. "The contract you made with my father is about to run out."

"Poor Captain Cree," she said. "I've taken his death so to heart. Felt in some way responsible. But man's folly is endless. Only the Master," and she rolled her eyes upwards, "not a poor widow, can cipher it out."

Lucius waited for her to compose herself. She seemed sincere and yet . . . He said in an even voice, "Why should you feel responsible?"

And waited.

"Oh, that foolish contract. Captain Cree felt I never forgave him my Duncan's death. Oh, it was not him." Did her voice falter, or was it that she spoke too fast? "It was myself I never forgave. I was a town girl. I persuaded Duncan to work in papa's store, for eventually the store would be mine. That was my awful mistake. We speak of the mistakes we make, but we are given the choice of only one. He wanted me to follow him to the woods. He was a hunter, you see. I had married a hunter and didn't have the sense to know it. And so I put him in a cage. I was with child and thought of the child and myself. And because of the child he gave in. But after work he would take me driving. It was a wild drive, always at a run. It was as if he could not go fast enough out of town. I did not understand, but later I did, too late I did. He was like some pet beast let out of his cage, and he ran and ran." She

stopped and daubed her eyes. "It always calmed him, and he was docile when we drove home. It was always the back roads, and they were rough. As I learned to my sorrow. The child miscarried. I almost died."

She looked down; then she resumed. Her voice was low and hard. "And then that war came, that foolish and hateful war. He flew to it like a bird out of his cage. I understood my mistake then, how I had thrown away my love. So I followed him, to ride by his side and never leave it. It was too late. I didn't blame Captain Cree. No, I didn't blame him. But if he had only understood, how different things would be."

The tears were running down her cheeks, and the powder was running. He had never seen so much water flow so readily out of a woman's eyes. He gulped his toddy, to look away. "So," she went on, "that's why I played that foolish game of the contract. I did it for Captain Cree's regret. To ease his conscience. Oh, if men would only grow up."

She dried her eyes; at last the heaving bosom grew calm, and her mounds of flesh now all dead weight pressed into and filled the hatrack up to its bronze hooks, standing out around her neck and shoulders so that she looked like the fat girl at the fair whom the knife-thrower has outlined with his blades, the last blade still quivering in the wood as she waits in the strain of attention, the moment before realization that the act is over and she can step forward, smiling, to flip the hands for applause. And Lucius watching her thought, If her act is an act, the blades are real. But he must know. "Aunt Amelie, may I ask a question?"

"You may ask," she replied. "I don't promise to answer."

"Did father ask you for more time?"

"He didn't have to," she said at once. "When he paid off his last note, I told him to take as long as he liked."

Only a handful of words, casually spoken; but what they had said! If they were true, he had been wrong about what he thought made his father kill himself. As he stood in the full knowledge of what she had just revealed, "Then why . . . Then what?" Low,

intense, the words had passed his lips, less a question than a cry. His aunt's head was slightly bent; he saw he was looking into the shady mirror of the hatrack behind her head; in its dark reflection he thought he saw her curls writhing slowly, as if to untangle themselves; and then her chin came up. "Sit down," she said. She waited for him to obey. "Of course it could have been an accident."

"But you don't believe it," he cried. He restrained his voice, "Neither do I."

"I neither believe nor disbelieve. Who can read a dead man's mind?"

"There is something being withheld from me," he said with the intensity of an accusation.

"And you think I am holding back?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't speak it, but speech is not the only language." Now as if she were gathering all her flesh behind her voice—and across the distance which separated them he could feel the effort it took; he could also feel something deadly serious—she waited, then she said, and each word came to him separate, yet linked in some final, fateful order, foreknown and kept for just this moment, "Go over to the secretary and you will find a document that will settle your doubts. Go ahead."

But he did not move at once. All his attention was put on balancing the now empty china cup upon his knee. He was thinking the slightest movement would release the trembling under his skin and topple it to the floor. Breathing carefully, he concentrated on raising his hand. He reached the cup and it clattered in its saucer. He walked in measured steps to the table and set it down. Her eyes were upon him all the way, but when he raised his own to question hers at close range, she no longer saw him. She was looking towards the pile of papers on top of the secretary drawer. So direct and compelling was the glance he had only to go there and, without hesitation, pick the right paper off the top of the pile.

"There's another under it," she said. "Take that too."

It was a heavier document than the first one. Methodically he

slipped it beneath the other and waited, as if to be told what next to do. He was staring into the alcove in front of him, at Mercury forever poised upon the moment of his marble flight, the backward kick of the feathered heel, the feathered cap already bent to the wind, and the caduceus held high up in front as its twin serpents intertwining made an oval of the air.

"That took some courage," she said. "Few of us want the proof, when we don't know where it will lead. Now read it."

It was a deed from her to him of the timber land. He had reread the opening paragraphs several times, when he heard her ask impatiently, "Look at the date."

He read the date. "Does that mean anything to you?"

He turned at last and shook his head.

"It marks the decision you made to fulfill Captain Cree's contract. When I learned this, I had the lawyer draw up the deed, that other paper is an abstract of title. I said Now let it wait for him. If he comes to me, he shall have it, for I'll know he is a man and not just a tool of Pete Legrand's. If he don't, well let the deed lie there. But you came. It's yours, unencumbered. You are free to take your own risks and deal in your own way."

"But why did you do this for me?" he could only say in his bewilderment.

"It's not for you I did it."

"Not for me?"

"For your Uncle Duncan. The timber was his. It's my way of making up to him for my failure. How that Pete Legrand hated him! Pete knows the one thing Duncan could not have stood was for him to marry your mother."

"Marry my mother!" Lucius cried and took a step forward. "Mr. Legrand?"

"Don't you know what he's up to? The whole county does. It has followed his moves as it would watch a game. It's nothing to me whether she marries him or not. I've never been one of your mother's admirers. But to see Duncan's sister put into a position where she *has* to marry him . . ."

Lucius leaned back against the secretary to steady himself. The drawer made a loud creak; and in that moment, in the somber room, he received and took as his own the full knowledge of the truth. He had known it all along. He had lacked the courage to confess it. He had pretended he was earning his inheritance. How he despised that word now, and all along it was she, his mother, making a sacrifice of herself that earned it, that bought it. All her behavior was crystal clear. Why she had asked him not to question her reasons for not wanting him to come here. She had known what he would learn from his Aunt Amelie. She had not known he would be given the means of saving her. There was no time to waste. "Aunt Amelie," he said, "I'm in your debt. But now I must go."

She had risen and was holding out his cup. "I have not diluted this. The pure stuff," and he heard the faint click as the cups touched.

He drank his at a gulp, but she did not drink with him. The cup wedged to her finger was forgotten in her triumph. She had forgotten, it seemed to him, where she was and who she was. The light in her eyes burned, he could only think, like a real fire. Perspiration popped out on her face like blisters; the hot stale odor of flesh and the rancid smell of starch melting made him giddy. It is the whiskey, he said to steady himself, swaying a little on his feet in a moment growing too long. And then she turned away, as if she had purged herself of all her weight; she moved to the bell cord and jerked it. "Ossie will show you out," she said and waited.

He bowed. She remained, with cup in hand, as if arrested in the performance of a ritual which his presence had interrupted. It was this picture that he carried away as he crossed to the door, what he knew at the time would be the image that would remain from this strange encounter with his uncle's widow. But there was yet more to come. As he was stepping over the threshold from behind him he heard the whoosh, the flash of light. He had the instant impression that if he looked behind him, he would look into an empty room. At his elbow he heard the servant's voice, "This way, please, Mr. Croleigh."

He followed her obediently down the hall, and all the way he was bothered by some error which must be corrected before he left the house. He stepped onto the porch, and it came to him. "This is not Mr. Croleigh. This is Mr. Cree, Mr. Lucius Cree." But the door was already closing. It soughed to, and he found himself alone, blinking in the daylight.

The sun had burned away the mist in town, but driving down the pike at a fast trot, he saw the rain clouds still hung to the south, over the farm and towards the river. He felt free, elated even, as the phaeton rolled lightly behind the powerful team. He could not reach his mother too quickly. He must make her understand the folly of what she had convinced herself was the thing to do. He had been right not to stop and register the deed. He felt his breast pocket and the bulge of the papers reassured him, for it was not quite believable yet. Except for the proof he could wonder if he had dreamt it. And then, slowly settling in his thoughts, clearing his head with a small shock the word repeated itself. Proof? What proof had he? He had a deed in his pocket, which in no way cleared up but only deepened the mystery of his father's death. In the clear daylight, free of that house and that presence, the flash in the room now returned in all its meaning. His Aunt Amelia had not drunk to his good luck! She had flung the drink into the fire.

Why as he drove on rapidly did those words of long ago recur—If you aint careful, son, you'll overtake yourself—?

Pete Legrand stood ankle-deep in the thick red water. It overlay the fields across the pike; the pike had disappeared; it was rising up to the floor boards of the warehouse where they had stacked the grain and what cotton was left in storage. If it continued to rise . . . at first he had set his will to stay the waters, hold fast grist mill and gin; but his will had melted before the whirling resistless flow of—it could not be called a river: the river, too, had drowned. He felt an ominous quiet in the noisy rain, which at least was a relief after the flood's early fury pounding over the dam,

making the silence roar. But the dam had disappeared beneath the spreading waters; the silence flowed all liquid now at the center of the current. But the relief was for hearing only. He watched, as one might terror behind closed eyelids, the ground turn molten, and bubble and suck and slowly move; so he received in mild surprise the sight of the mill shifting, then shift again, sway and lean forward until, the stone foundations crumpling like cardboard, it toppled over. In a few minutes there was nothing to see but a few boards and girders plunging and bobbing on the current and the roof, tilted like a chicken house, racing away.

He batted his eyes. The landscape was changed. He might have been a man dropped suddenly into a strange country trying to get his bearings. And then he felt the anger, the more for his helplessness now, he the man who knew how to avert, control, predict . . . and then he saw the shed he had built to house his wagons over the idle season. It stood on a knoll, high and dry and empty, except for the barouche. It sat in the protection of its cover untouched in all its shiny elegance, the slim upright shafts, the frivolous wheels. As he stared, he felt a sense of blind affront and without volition began walking towards it. At the top of the knoll, not pausing, he seized the shafts and dragged the vehicle out of its safe harborage. He cut the wheels on the downslope of the knoll and, running, pushed it into the water. "You go too, damn you," he shouted.

And then his foot slipped and the water was up to his armpits. Before he could take this in, two strong hands grabbed him about the shoulders and lifted him upon firm ground. And the voice above him, "You don't want to mess wid that."

He lunged to his feet. It was Rhears, standing to his side, grave, looking not at him but into the flood with hooded eyes. "No, sir, water out of banks is old Marster's business."

His chest rose and fell; he felt suddenly spent, but his mind open and clear. "Rhears, aren't you out of pocket?"

"Miss Jule sont me to fetch you."

At her name the fear, nameless and subterranean, now bobbed

up to the surface and lay between the two men. "Is she all right?"

"It's Mr. Lucius," the servant said.

"Yes?"

"She sонт for Mr. Jack. He off trading. She sонт for Dr. Crop-leigh. He off up the Rim, tending Mr. Meek's daughter swallowed a snake . . ."

"What's happened to Lucius?"

Rhears looked up into the rainy sky, studying it idly, as if there were nothing more to say.

"Well?" He said impatiently.

Softly Rhears spoke; he might have been addressing the elements. "Mr. Lucius went calling on Mr. Duncan's widow."

He received the words in all their meaning. His body and mind snapped together. Calculating in the fine urgency of intuition, he knew he did not have time to change clothes. He must get to the farm before Lucius returned. He did not pause to ask when the boy might be expected home, but in a single motion turned and was walking towards the buggy hitched to the warehouse porch. As he stepped over the wheel into the buggy, Saul Slowns was beside him. He unwound the reins from the whip, said, "Go to town and get a marriage license for me and Julia Cree. Get the preacher and bring him to her house. Just say we have a matter of charity to discuss." Before Saul could reply, he had lifted the reins and was driving away.

At last he had come to the decisive moment. He took this in in a kind of elation. It was true he had left a way out, a respite rather in the lie to be told the preacher. But it was no more than a respite, allowing for some unforeseen miscalculation of timing, for timing cannot be foreseen outside the rise of the act to the crucial yea or nay of Providence: in twenty-four hours the license would be known over the county.

he plied the whip and the horse took up its utmost stretch of gait.

He saw it all, half listening to the muted clop of the hooves; he had been circling the center of his want; now he would aim

for the bull's-eye. It took the loss of the gin and mill to show him, a power he had never felt, blind and merciless, before which he had so blasphemously rebelled. Blind? Merciless? He blessed it now. At the very moment of his loss, Rhears had brought him the word. That was no accident. He was appalled to think he had expected to gain his all at no cost.

As the buggy brought him on, he turned these thoughts over in his mind, his mind and purpose growing clearer before the mystery whose actor he was, so that when he reached the house, it seemed to him that the distance had contracted for him. He had arrived before he had started good. The house itself showed clean and glittering from its fresh paint and the wash of rain. It was still and had the air of waiting. He was in time. He knew this as if he were already inside, and yet his common sense told him the house would look so, if Lucius had arrived before him. Only once did his purpose falter. On the verandah, as he tossed aside his slicker, saw his muddy boots and foul clothes, he felt timid before the appearance he would make inside. Savagely he wiped his boots; wiped his mind, too, and the door opened. She stood just inside, her face white and distraught, in all the calm of desperation. "Oh, you have come," she said.

He took her in his arms. She seemed not to know he had done it. He would not think it was her need for comfort, the restoring comfort of flesh touching flesh which made her respond to his chest and arms. His head turned giddy; his heart leaped and flung her from him. They went into the parlor and she drew him into a far corner. "It will be all right," he said.

Oh, all wrong."

She faced him, twisting, a handkerchief in her hands. He took her hands gently in his and firmly sat her in a chair. She leaned forward. "I couldn't stop him. I don't know what came over me, but I could not stop him." Rising, she walked in the flow of her words. "I sent for Brother Jack. I did not think of Dickie first—I wish that I had—Jack is so close to him, but Dickie was

there. He would have stopped him, if I had only thought of him first. My brothers were not there when I needed them. . . .”

“And so you sent for me.”

“To whom else was I to turn?”

“To no other. This is ours . . . together.” This brought her a little out of herself and she looked at him.

“You see, I came straight to your call. Just like this,” and he gestured towards his garments. “The flood washed gin and mill away. I did not stop to change clothes, or to look back. I rushed to you,” and he walked towards her; but a slight tremor of her body stopped him.

“It took me so by surprise,” she said.

“What did?”

“Lucius. You know he’s scarcely been home since December. I think he is a little jealous of you.”

“Jealous?”

“Of you, and feeling left out. He loves the farm. It is his home.”

“This we will untangle now. Julia . . .”

“And then he rode up and I saw him, for a moment I thought it was Duncan, he sat the horse so, he has grown to look and move like Duncan. It was that put me out of balance, I could not stop him. And now that woman has told him all.” She bowed her head into the handkerchief. She beat her mouth in fluttering strokes, the linen limp and damp falling out of her little fist.

“Now, Julia. Pull yourself together. Tell me. Did he say why he wanted to see Miss Amelie?”

“That timber. How I hate those trees. I hate that woman.”

“You mean he wanted the contract extended?”

“He was stubborn about it. He wants to be free of debt to you. I tried to tell him. He’s so headstrong like . . . like Duncan.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Glad!”

“Glad he’s turning into a man.” And then wryly, almost to himself, for she was not listening or seeing him, “For Lucius to

make of me his adversary, make me his hone, it's deep and hard, much more than I thought to have to handle."

"She will tell him."

"You can't be sure of that."

"Oh." She dismissed this with a quick lift of the head. "She told Cousin Joe."

"So."

"She sent my husband back to me a stranger."

"Lucius will come back, too, and soon. We've got to decide what to say and do. There's only one thing to do. . . ."

"Oh, what have I done to my son?"

"What we have done, we'll undo as we can. The time always comes when the truth is the only way."

"The truth. What she will make of it. She lost me my husband. She has lost me my son."

"Not yet, Julia," he said quietly.

"How do you know? Don't I know . . .?"

"Now listen to me." He raised his voice.

She interrupted, "If you could have seen him, dashing up the drive . . ."

"Lucius?"

"My husband. And he came into my room, I scarcely recognized his face. It was as if he had never seen my sewing room before. Or me. He stood somewhere way off, not where he was. His voice, that word . . . *Is Lucius Legrand's bastard?* He asked a question; he put it in the form of a statement. *Is it true, woman?* He called me woman. His wife. That was the greatest shock of all, for he was ever perfect in courtesy. I tried to tell him, to say—Does all our life long together mean nothing to you? Is this one mischance all? But nothing I could do or say could unfreeze that look of shocked righteousness. Soften the brutality of his words. Why were we taught words, why is not touch and sight and feeling enough? It is enough in the dark, at night. He looked at me, and I . . ."

Her voice grew hard and out of control. He saw he must act

and he took her shoulders and shook her gently until she quietened.

"Julia," he said. "There is one thing to do. We must marry as soon as we can. It is late, but . . ."

"Marry you! Give proof to her malice? Lose him forever? Are you mad?"

"Neither mad, nor mad. I love you, Julia. I have been like a man called out of his bridal night to go some far distance. I am now come home, after what wanderings of the mind, with bruised hands and callous feelings. I am come home. To my wife, to my son."

She regarded him, for a moment half convinced, half drawn to his words. Then her lips curled. Bitterly she said, "How do you know he is your son?"

"How? Surely . . ." he began, but sight of her stopped him. "What do you mean?"

"I only wanted to be loved for myself alone. All of you are alike. There was one who loved me for myself. My brother Duncan. That's what that woman, his wife, cannot forget or forgive." She looked up at him. Her voice had now lost its frenzy. "My husband stood there, banishing me. His face tight as silk. Oh, he was righteousness itself. I could have taken injured pride. I could have mended that. But righteousness is hard as stone. It never melts in love. I saw then my husband had never loved me. He had put me into the pieces of his mind, but the puzzle was all scattered. That's what his face told me, puzzle pieces put together with paste, all in the wrong places. Gashes of white paste. And I had thought him made of pride and honor, and charity between. *It's true then*, he said, beating his voice like cold iron. I shut my eyes not to see him so, to save us all, you will never know what it took to do this. I said, with my eyes closed, *You believed her. Your mind believed her. You have no heart. If you'd ever loved me, you'd have given her the lie. Self-pity and vanity. That's what you are. Marbles in your head that click and click. And the taw your wife, and the taw your son you knocked out of the ring.* And then I wept, and then I opened my eyes and the stranger, my husband, was as before.

That's when I discovered I had no heart either. Hearts are the frailest things. Breath fed on love. Hold your breath or choke, it dries like dew. I replied to my husband, *No, it's not true.*"

Pete Legrand said, "You lied for him. It's a lie all honor."

"There is no honorable lie. A lie is nothing. I told the truth."

He stepped back a pace to see her better. "I only meant you knew Lucius is my son."

"My son. My son. Never our son."

"Julia, Julia," and he came to seize, to stop her voice.

"No. Wait. And my husband said, *You do not lie well. No, I don't*, I said. *But suppose it is true. Think. I was a child of fourteen, brought up with brothers. In the wilds so much of the time. Can you blame a child? Have I not made you a good wife?* I waited for him to say one word out of pity, understanding even. Even then, if he had only spoken, all might have been mended. We could have taken up our life again. But his face was all paste. It was then I killed him."

"You killed him?" Pete Legrand said, and he heard his breath come and go.

"You remember the suit Duncan made for me, how tight it was?"

"Remember?" he whispered. "You ask me that?"

"That night before the hunt, it bound me so I could not sleep. Under the blanket I slipped it off. Duncan had turned wild and cruel when he learned of my betrothal. I did not understand. I only suffered his odd behavior, and so when during the night sometime he lay down beside me, as we had done oh how many times before in all innocence and unknowing—for we walked the woods in that careless joy before the world began—I thought he is returned to me, my brother is himself again. We are ourselves both again. In my sleep, in that feeling of safety and wholeness which I only felt in his presence, I turned to him, my arm slid under his as before. Was I asleep or awake? Was he asleep? His arm pressed down like a vise. How shall I say it? The knowledge that I was to be taken from him had brought him to such desper-

tion? Did he think what he did to me would never part us? Did he think?"

"What are you telling me?" he whispered. And again, not knowing whether he had thought or spoken.

And then he thought he heard all the sorrow that ever is, strained through her refining voice, "What I told my husband that day. That's what I am telling you. My husband spoke no more of lies. He spoke no more to me. He faltered against the door; and the door, giving, let him out. I never saw him alive again."

"Wait," he said. "Stop a minute."

"Duncan. Cousin Joe. Now you. There's only Lucius left to go."

They hung there in the cold air, forever parted, forever in sight, like dolls from a string. His breath rushed back. He took a step to steady himself.

"No, no. Go away," she moaned.

But he came the short way to her. It seemed he was idling as through the long summer's day, when the light grows wearisome, and the night a brief twilight between sun and sun.

"Don't touch me. I'm damned. I'm cursed and damned. I kill men. Oh, oh. Oh . . ." And she raised her hands to cover her face. He saw how small they were. So pitifully small, they could not quite hide her face, that face he knew from which he would never now be parted. But he waited as still as she, in the wonder of what she had had to bear. To bear alone. The courage and skill and care she had used to perfect her disguise, to guard her son, make of the confusion some sense. No wonder so many had loved her, and betrayed her. Selfless grace always self-betraying, itself offering itself again. He felt the gift of thanksgiving, of strength to receive it, that he was here to care for and cherish her. That was all he would ever ask. Trembling he put forth his hands and took hers from her eyes. "Julia," he said.

"You must go away," she said dully.

"I won't leave you. Ever," he replied.

"No. Go quickly."

He had only to reach out his arms to take her in. She did not

resist, nor did she respond. She let him hold her, spent as one beyond all succor is spent. This frightened him and he began to whisper in her ear, his words jumbled, running together, not making sense except their inchoate outpouring poured into her his love, his urgency. At last she sighed and put her arms about him, resting there like a child.

They remained so, even after they heard it, the sound of the wheels rolling up the drive, crunching and throwing creek gravel. The noise abruptly stopped before the horse block. She tightened her arms as if to take from him what strength he had, and then released him. "It's Lucius," she said.

"You let me speak to Lucius. This is all mine to do."

"No."

"No. It's all mine now."

And then he took her hand and stepped beside her, and then together they moved forward in the room, waiting.

The boy paused in the hall, looked swiftly about, and then he saw them. He came slowly over the deep rugs and silently. He stopped just within the parlor door. Swiftly, clearly like water in sunlight, his eyes flicked from one to the other. They came to rest upon his mother. All his purpose showed in his firm sound face, his direct glance. Pete Legrand felt a leap of pride and then distress at what he must now accept, the knowledge that the boy whom he had for so long in secret regarded as his son might be, almost surely was, another's.

"So it's true then, what she told me." Lucius spoke in low tones, almost to himself. Yet how the words carried.

Pete Legrand dropped Julia's hand and stepped forward. "Truth," he replied. "Son, your mother and I have been talking about truth."

"Mr. Legrand," Lucius said coldly, "you've no right to call me son."

"Very well, Lucius. But let me make my defense, mine, not ours. Will you hear me out, and then perhaps you will let me earn that right."

He could see the boy waver in his decision at this unexpected plea. He went on quickly, drawing a little nearer, "Remember that I was young, older than your mother but still young. Remember, too, that I had loved her all my life. That I hoped to make her my wife. But that day of the hunt we, following a wounded buck, passed under a waterfall, under a mountain, into a hunter's paradise. It seemed to us, to me, that we had entered a world all our own, a secret private place, beautiful and strange. The trees were aromatic, drugging us. We hung the deer. Night fell. We found ourselves within a cedar grove, alone. If you could only understand that, in the light of our fire which shut us further in together, it could seem that there was no tomorrow, only now. Convention failed in that climate. We loved each other that night. With the day, of course, we would have come to our senses. It seemed so far off. It came and brought her brothers. They found us asleep in each other's arms. I was struck down in the fight with Duncan. I was helpless. For days my life was despaired of. And in that time your uncles married your mother to Captain Cree. Your mother was very young, and accustomed to obey them."

He waited, they all waited in the swelling silence; then Lucius cried out, "What are you telling me?"

In that instant Pete Legrand saw it all, what he had done, the trick Amelie had played. He saw Lucius's face go all to pieces.

"Mother, what is he telling me?"

Julia gave one low moan and fell in a swoon to the floor. In one bend he picked her up and put her on the davenport. "Get some water, boy," he said.

But the words did not reach Lucius. The quiet told him this, as gently he lowered Julia's head into his hand for the blood to flow. He felt the hard skull as the hair slid; her marble stillness frightened him. He looked up then and caught the boy's eye. Lucius straightened as if his look had struck him.

"Are you saying I'm your bastard?"

"Get some water." The tone of his voice was matter of fact. He marveled at it. "Your mother's fainted."

Lucius turned slowly away and stumbled back into the hall. He chafed her hands and waited. At some time he heard the phaeton roll down the drive; at some time Julia's eyes fluttered. Carefully Legrand brought her to a sitting position. Her hand reached her cheek. "You feel all right?" he asked.

She looked at him dazedly; he was sitting beside her stroking her other hand. Suddenly she took her hand away and, grasping the seat, looked about the room. "Lucius," she said.

"Lucius is gone," he replied as easily as he could.

She tried to rise; he held her back. "You must go after him. Go."

"Later," he said. "It would do no good now. He must have time. We must give him time."

"Time," she said. As if the very word made her limp she leaned back and stared listlessly into the room. He put pillows around her and behind her head. "You rest a little," he said.

And then, when he thought she would never speak again, "There's a blight to my fingers. They yellow all they touch. And inside me, one big green thumb."

Water. The word echoed water, watr, waw . . . drops of sound in the vacuum of Lucius's head. The hall door was open; his ears walked into the opening. Outside sky and earth ran with water; inside sound raining down its shadow. On the verandah the moist chill enveloped him. He shivered. The streaming sky drenched his sight. He cupped his hands and thrust them into the rain; it spattered into the small bowl of flesh; the cold drops pricked a pattern; he watched its reflection tattooing his eyes—his mother swooning, Legrand lifting her . . . the phaeton was standing in the drive, the carriage horses drooping under their dark hides, steaming. His legs stepped onto the ground, automatically he crossed over to the vehicle and took his seat. He unwound the lines and spoke to the horses. They did not want to go and swerved towards the barn lot. He sawed the lines and raised the whip. The team danced heavily down the drive, onto the pike.

He held in his hands the reckless plunging power; the hooves

gathered momentum along the funnel of the pike. The phaeton rocked and jumped, spinning its wheels in air, in the limestone slush. His arms gave with the rhythm, forward and back, and along the leather from bit to hand, down his arms, his trunk, his thighs, the might of the beasts drove its wedge. Suddenly the rain held up and the mist drew down. It lay to the sides of the pike, a cloudy down muffling the noise of his flight. It lay before the horses' heads, the limit of sight. There the nodding manes rolled in their socket, the cleft a vise: spinning the treadmill. Spinning, poised in motion until the sun overhead made a hole in the vapor, as cool as a swollen moon. Objects to the side of the fences began to appear, blurred, then oddly familiar. Beyond one fence, on the upslope of ground, he saw the Croleigh homestead rise up out of its brown shadow, a solid object. He turned in at the gate.

John Greer came up in his quick sure stride, his round yellow face smiling. The smile withdrew as he saw the team. He looked at Lucius. "Mr. Lucius, you loss blood? Your face don't show none."

"Half of it."

"Nobody aint cut you?"

"You can lose blood, and not spill a drop."

The words slipped out like the statement of some remote truth. The numbness which had sustained him was beginning to draw. He must be careful, pretend he was still what he was not. The weather-beaten house, dripping from the eaves, was gray but solid. He had a right here at least. This was Croleigh house. "You better come in the house," John said. He could hear the concern in his voice. "This team, what you drive this team so hard for?"

He jumped over the wheel; his heels stung as he hit the ground. Amon, John's brother-in-law, slouched around the corner and smiled his lazy, apologetic smile. "You, Amon," John said. "Take this team to the barn and rub it down. Then gie it water. Let it blow before you waters it."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Greer," Amon replied with mocking deference. He leaned forward as if in haste but did not increase his stride.

Once inside Lucius could hear the wheels roll slowly away. The

chill of winter still hung upon the dead air of the hall. He was shivering as they entered the family room. "Where's Uncle Jack?"

John did not answer. He was drawing a chair before the hearth in his quick efficient way; and then he was kneeling before it, and almost miraculously a fire was leaping out of his hands, the cedar kindling crackling, the sharp oily scent cleaning the stale air, the stale smell of a place which only men inhabit. The pale yellow flames began to streak with red. The blaze was real and good, brightening the room; yet the heat was small. He hugged himself and leaned towards it, shivering harder. "You chillen," John said. "I fix you something."

He heard the door softly close. He looked around where all was familiar, yet strange now, and leaned closer into the fire. The words flickered, Who am I? What am I? I'm nothing. Lucius Cree is a lie. A lie is nothing. The air clotted, hovered above him like huge black wings. The wings began to fan slowly. In the firelight, flickering, they rose and fell. Across his face they sucked the heat; behind his back their invisible feathers fluttered and the chill fluffed down. The flames darkened. . . . "Here," John Greer was saying. He smelled the sweet sharp aroma. "This toddy do you good." He drank it in two big gulps.

Solicitous, standing back from him, John Greer, understanding only that something was wrong, said, "Mr. Jack, he be in any time now."

Lucius felt he was about to cry.

The kettle was sizzling on the hearth. Briskly John spoke again, not looking at him. "Lemme fix you another, but don't you drink this so fast."

He said, "I need to see Uncle Jack."

"He be in."

Behind him he could hear the stirring, the click of the silver spoon against the glass. It clicked and stirred the sugar and water, he was lying on his bed with croup, his father leaning over with a tender frown, his mother stirring . . . he shook his head violently and the image faded. She—is—my—mother. Jack is her brother.

If he were here, he would somehow make it all right. His mother's and Jack's blood were the same. He was sure of that, and yet there was the taint, and so Jack's blood was tainted, too, the Croleigh in all of them had it. . . .

"You say something?" John Greer asked.

A bastard. In the silence of his thought he received the word. He could not make it go down. It hung inside like a spot of ice that won't melt. Pete Legrand's bastard.

"Here," John Greer said. "Sip it along."

He was aware that John was waiting for something; and then, when he did not speak, he heard him turn to leave the room. And then he knew what it was. "Don't go. Sit down," he said almost humbly. The very way John took his seat showed him it was John's chair, and that in it he and his uncle must often sit together, but with the amenities kept: John had waited for him to invite him. And then his mind veered, his scalp tightened; the room turned hostile. What was *his* place now? He said with difficulty, "I haven't seen Uncle Jack in months. It's strange," and he looked to John for enlightenment. Had Jack foreseen and, helpless to help, abandoned him?

"He strange to me," John replied. "He aint been the same since he fell in your pa's grave."

The words reamed him like a knife. He had buried his father in the rain. He must bury him again, and this time forever. Bury memory, too.

"Once enough for any man to go into the ground," John said. "He fell in a jackass man. He come out a trader. He been buying mules all up and down the country. Staying gone way souf most the time. Lef me to breed the jacks. With all I got to do. I glad though when he come home, taken a interest again in what he know to do. He gone off now seeing about a jack he bought off'n two sisters, way back up on the Rim. Fine looking jack, blacker than any nigger. He traced him from his get. Big stout mules, matching well. Fetched him the mostest money, he said. He brought

him here and that jack didn't do nothing. Nothing, Mr. Lucius. No more'n a mule. He gone now to see about it."

"He's not on the place then?"

John looked at him curiously. "He due in, less the bridges washed out."

"He never came to see how I was making out at the sawmill. Not once. I was so busy then, but now. Why didn't he come, John?"

"That's what I tell you," John Greer said. "Way off in Souf Alabama."

Jack had foreseen and was ashamed or afraid. All that talk about the Indian boy. Of course. He saw it all. There's a thought. The West. He could lose himself there, take another name . . . he had no need to do that. He already had a name he had no right to. Lucius Cree. There is no Lucius Cree. He would go out there and hide under it. . . .

"Mr. Lucius?"

"Yes?"

"I say, what mosely make him not the same, he don't talk no more. Like he mouf binding him. Of course he always looked to me to run this place. Sometimes he tell me what to do, and he have right smart ideas about what needing to be done. It was his way of jollyng me. He knowed it. I knowed it. Mostly it was talk and toddies. Now he don't even tell me how no more. Souf Alabama sure make a preacher of a man, but it don't give him no text. He worry me. No sir, it don't do no man good to fall in a grave not his own. But I haves hope, now he taken to jackassing again."

As if he had neglected the amenities, John got briskly up and mixed two more drinks, and then he began to talk about the crop he was getting ready to put out, how they were behind and the rain had thrown them still further behind, but they would get it in if they lived and nothing didn't happen, and with pride he let it be known that Jack's long absence had caused no extra delay. Things on the farm had gone on as if he were here. The recounting of the small familiar happenings made Lucius suddenly feel left

out. The drone of John's voice asking for approval, his unconscious identity with Jack and Jack's concerns made Lucius feel he was an interloper. He had no place here, or anywhere now. Suddenly he felt he could not bear to be in his uncle's house any longer. He stood up. "John, will you get my team? I've got to go."

John's face went blank. "Go?" he said. "Go where? Della get supper."

He looked about for some excuse; he saw he had hurt John's feelings. He said, "The sawmill."

Slowly John took this in. "Trouble take you there?"

"Trouble."

"I knowed something was the matter," and he waited for Lucius to tell him.

And as Lucius got into the phaeton, he was still waiting, hurt now and wondering. "What I tell Mr. Jack?" he asked.

"Tell him," and Lucius paused; then came out with it, "Tell him that when I see him again, it will be for the last time."

The last time . . .

He had not meant to say that. He had opened his mouth and the words came out—just as before the word sawmill spoke itself. He had not thought of going there; he had not thought. It was as if another spoke from deep inside him, and he heard the word, sawmill, and knew it was the right word to leave on. It was there he had a legal right. He would go there and collect himself, decide where to go. The timber land was all his. He had the deed in his pocket. He felt to make sure. And then his hand upon his chest, touching the bulge there, as if his touch were required to make it show itself, he saw the truth in all its malevolence. He sat very still to take it in; and the horses, feeling his withdrawal, went into a slow walk.

The deed was made to Lucius Cree! Amelie Croleigh had tricked him, had tricked them all with a piece of paper. In the clarity of his despair each move in her stratagem showed itself. Her evasion when she gave him the deed. Oh, that deed was not this

deed! Can words so change and be still the same words? If blood can, then words can. He was taken in, because it seemed to explain away the reason he had held for his father's suicide. It was his own feeling of guilt that had led him astray. Amelie had let his own half truth blind him twice. Oh, but her whole action was a lie! For she knew. How clear it was, oh, how he saw it all! It was Amelie who had told his father that his son was not his son

and Captain Cree must have gone then to his mother and she must have . . . for his mother would not lie. His mother knowing this naturally thought that Amelie would say to him what she had told her husband. How else explain her desperate plea to him not to have anything to do with Duncan's widow? Duncan. That name always keeps cropping up. And so . . .

and so the widow Cree and the son of a bitch, Peter Legrand, consulted together and decided to confess what they thought he already knew. And make of confession a plea for understanding. And what a plea. How sweet it is, bastard-making. How could he not agree? Was he not the proof? He agreed. In the little cedar glade, so private and nice, the very aroma of privacy. Who could resist it? Not the widow Cree. Not the son of a bitch, Pete Legrand. Under the greenwood tree, oh . . . In the night time is the right time for Sir Pete oh . . . This is the way the ladies ride, Pete, Pete, Pete, and the woods colt comes at a gallop, O o o o o

it's a time for ballad-making all right, all right

Too late, too late at the bridal gate
 The groom he cries full sore
 My love she is a whore
 For sure my love's a whore

They left that part out. That comes later. The little cozy fire in the little cozy glade did not show that. It showed enough, the little blue blaze. Did it leap and clap its hands when the bastard

seed leaped into the dark place no eye ever sees except old One-eye, the blind opening the blind in blindness? And then sleep and oblivion until cock crow. Cock crow . . . the discordant note, for there's no mention of cocks in paradise. Nor bastards either. They come later, after daybreak, after the fire falls into coals, and the coal into ash

Yet

there's always a spark left to blink, and one spark lights another. Else where do you get the flame to leap in Amelie's grate? If only he had seen her fling the drink, seen the curse flash, he would have known. He saw the reflection. Reflection is a ghost, and sometimes witches are fat. Did he even now understand it all? Was something kept back? Dead Duncans make witches, and witches mount the broomstick for auld lang syne. The midnight ride, ghosting air. But any barnyard rooster can crow away a ghost. And sunup shows the broomstick for what it is: dead wood. Love and dead wood burn so well together. They make cinders, and cinders hatch out love. Mama, you should have brought a girl, and I could have grown up and married the prince

you could have said No, mother.

He dipped his head quickly; shut his eyes. He opened them to see the cob stopper and the brown jug on the floor of the phaeton. John Greer must have put it there for comfort's sake. This small attention made the tears come and he took a quick drink to drown them. The whiskey made others start, and the tears washed tears, his weakness too. He had no place in him now for tenderness. He would grow gristle for feelings. He picked up the lines, made the horses lift their heads. His own head wavered ever so slightly, and he remembered he had not eaten since morning.

Morning. That was somewhere else.

Not under this gray sky, its clouds lifted into some damp and

lasting twilight, a motionless weather and empty, with nobody in field or woods, no vehicle in sight to hail. Only he, nameless, an anonymous kind of fellow behind two horses walking down a pike that went nowhere. What a wonderful freedom bastards have! He took another drink on this and began to feel better. No inheritance to worry with. And how he had tried to earn it. He should have known there was something spurious about an inheritance you had to earn. He would call all the hands together, old Sol too, and give them their time. That would be the last piece of business he would do, and then fancy-free, free to go, with no call to ask anybody leave, owing nothing. Except maybe to Jack.

Jack had tried, but all that talk of his, what was it but trying to talk down his conscience, for he and his brothers had betrayed their cousin, tricked him into marriage. It came to him that he, as he grew, tainted meat that he was, must always have kept that betrayal solid in Jack's sight. Never free, the conscience of wrongdoing. The best conscience, he guessed, could stand only so much shame, and so Jack took off to South Alabama, and if you buy and sell enough mules maybe you don't have time to think of anything but mules, and so forget shame . . . Lucius felt the hollow inside him fall and a rush of feeling rise up. Deliberately he smothered it and leaned back against the carriage seat, as if he had just lifted a load beyond his strength. He felt the team hold back against the shafts; he pulled in the lines . . . they were going down the grade of Penter's Hill. No, this was too long a grade and steep for Penter's Hill. He must have left that far behind. Can you pass a place and not know it? He tried to remember going through the tollgate there, just beyond the fork where you turn off to go to Legrand's mills; he could see old man Matchem fumbling at the gate pegs to unwind the rope; he could even see the gate slowly and jerkily yawning. But he had seen this so many times he could no longer distinguish. Or was there only one image to an act, and it out of time, always there behind the eye, in a kind of storehouse to which you went out of need? He leaned forward and looked sharply about. He saw well enough where he was. He was passing

down through the folded hills and rolling land of Pea Vine Ridge. This was the steepest part on the way down. The pike crawled and twisted on the slopes, turning abruptly around the declivities, through the limestone boulders, to level off into the last gradual drop, where he could see ahead the narrow mouth of the valley below. The false twilight was fading fast. Upon the top of the ridge sky and earth grew together in a lightless haze. The bottomlands below were already dark; the darkness was creeping upwards to meet him . . .

the farther slopes disappeared; the haze in between grew solid; the rail fences snaked him in until, as the team made a sharp turn, they too vanished. The horses sank into the night as into an invisible stream. He could not see; he could only feel them pick up and set down their hooves; as if now they had to be careful of the way. The hips of the mares undulated upon the current of his eyes; then his eyes no longer struggled against its heavy flow. Nothing else that he was did this current touch. His lungs took it in as common air; his body flowed into its emptiness. The wheels of the phateon rolled slowly through it. Muffled by it, the sound of his travels rolled lightly against his ears.

His spongy eardrums dropped it into the wandering blood

It crunched like a boot heel on glass. Into his blood stream the fragments shivered like a flight of arrows. He had come to a halt, suspended in a stillness. He smelled the smell of jaded horseflesh. A board creaked, a faint suffusion of yellow light, growing as it advanced, showed him his team stopped before the familiar toll-gate. He turned towards the yellow glow. The long gaunt figure of Ada Rutter stood on the gate porch, holding the lamp up and shading her eyes with her hand. Her lamp blurred the dark, and he saw she did not recognize him. She leaned forward, feeling him out. "You'd best turn about," she said. "You can't go no further." With a slight surprise he noticed the old familiar whine was almost out of her voice.

"Why not?"

"The bridge is out. Water over the pike and still a-rising." And then she stopped and took another step forward. "Why, that's Lucius, aint it? I liked not to a knowed you in that rig."

In the wide and total darkness of the night the lamp drew near like a malevolent eye which she held in her hand. As she leaned forward, shadows from the smoky chimney blotted her eyes like lids over empty sockets. And so they remained for a long instant, he held by the yellow flame, she holding it at the end of her long reach; and then a small draught made it blink. . . . So the pike went somewhere after all. Bang up against Ada Rutter's sty and the old common mud to wallow and grunt in. Anybody could find his level here, and none to ask for pedigrees. He felt a heavy thump inside his chest, and a bitter gladness rising up. . . .

It was then he became aware of her hesitation. In alarm he felt he must make her speak. He said, "So the bridge is out," and waited.

"Come in the house, if you aint forgot the way. I'll have Othel take the team to the barn."

Ada Belle was not in the room. What made him think, because he wanted it, that he would find her there, waiting for him to beckon? When their last time together was three months ago. What had she made of his absence, what could she have made of it but one thing, when the lumber camp was only thirty minutes away? In fresh bitterness he understood the husk of his former self was still to shed. What he was now, what he brought here was not what she would be prepared to receive. If only he could have her alone. His eyes quickly searched the room. The lamp on the toll desk, another on the mantel, just light enough to make the night visible, gave the almost bare room a secrecy which released a tumult in his blood . . . the few chairs, the rough bed hidden in the corner.

"Othel, you take Mr. Lucius's team to the barn."

Little Othel was watching him from beside the hearth, but it

was the company tone to Ada's voice, the arms folded under the chest, the constraint of a formality he had never seen her show which disturbed him.

"What ye got thar?" Little Othel asked and pointed.

It was the jug, hanging from a finger. He didn't remember bringing it in. Hopefully he said, "A little cheer. Take a snort before you go."

But Ada interrupted. "He don't drank none, sance he joined the church."

"I'm a-chilling, mammy."

"When you git back from the barn then. Go long now. Take a cheer, Lucius." And she sat opposite him spreading her skirt and lifting her hand to feel the knot of hair behind her head. There was such a travesty of elegance in her clumsy gestures, in her posture, Lucius could not keep from smiling. He forced himself to frown; concentrated on it until he felt he could control the laughter about to explode in her face. "When Othel come through," she was saying, "and I seen him rise up out of the water Jesus' own, I promised to give him back to God as pure as God had give him to me."

"Maybe I can offer you a little drop, then."

"It don't do to take toll, and the smell of sin on your breath. It aint respectable. Folks talk. And the folks in this district has been right clever since we come off the Peaks. There are new days and gooder ones than I looked to see again. I was a throwed-away woman up thar, but now . . ." and she smiled

"Things are better," he filled the pause.

"It's better on the Peaks, too. Jeff is a-prospering. Miss Nanny is good to him and Ruthy. I don't aim for us to be no drag on them."

"I see," he said; then, "But if the bridge is out, you'll have no gate to keep for a while. So maybe, madam, I could offer you a cordial. Even the properest lady will take a cordial now and then. This is a rare jug. It pours the drink according to the need."

"I'll take one for company's sake," she said, but not coyly as he had expected.

"And Ada Belle? Maybe she'll have one, too," and he hesitated, "for company's sake."

He said that quickly, too quickly, not looking at Ada. "I'll git the water bucket," she replied and left the room.

She had deliberately not answered him. Surely Ada Belle had not gone to bed. It was not that late, and yet maybe it was now too late, everywhere, for him. Or was it that the change he had suffered changed everything? But no, not Ada Rutter. She could play lady, but her apelike arms still hung to her knees, that man's stride—they had not altered. He could hold to that, and yet somehow the thought gave him no comfort.

"Have you eat your supper?" She asked, re-entering the gate room with the water bucket.

He shook the jug. "This is meat and drink."

"I'll set out bread and buttermilk," she said.

He poured strong drinks. "To change and changelings," he said, saluting her.

Slowly, like water, she emptied the mug and put it on the mantel.

"Let me pour you another," he said.

"Thank ye, no. Now, young man," she resumed, taking again her chair, "I'm glad you come by tonight. I am glad to drink to change. Hit's what I want you to know. When we come back to this country, when you first knowed us, we was hongry and ragged and unheartened. We lighted on the Peaks, cast away from folks. Somehow I taken no thought as to how we got our bread. With no man to do for me, I had to make out with the gals. An empty belly don't much keer how you grease it. An empty belly and pore folks is well acquainted."

"You never saw a poorer man than me," he said.

She looked at him distantly, in appraisal. "Rich folks short of money, they call that being pore. Pore folks out of bread starve. It aint the same. But keeping gate now is like being paid to idle. I can pass the time of day with them that passes by, hear the news . . ." She paused and then looked so sharp a glance, he drew back. "I don't aim to let nothing nor nobody to hinder it." She

made sure he understood this and then, "When you can look for bread to come reglar to table, you find you got time for feelings. You named Ada Belle. She taken it hard when you passed the gate like a stranger. She moped and moped. I said—He don't aim to marry you."

"What did she say?" He dropped his eyes.

"She said—I never ast him to. But the time comes when a gal needs a reglar man. And there's another time don't wait." She added casually, "She's keeping company with Luke Nobles."

"With that harelip?" He gasped.

The shadow of a smile passed her mouth. "I call it to be always a-smiling."

"But Ada Belle . . ." and he felt the dark blood flush and swell under his skin.

"Luke's a stout young fellow. He'll come into a nice farm in due course."

Lucius was standing now. He tried to control his voice, "You've done well in so short a time, Mrs. Rutter. No grass has grown under your feet. High and low, valley and Peaks. It looks like you can't lose. This felicity you've planned for Ada Belle—might I see her please and give my congratulations?"

Ada had risen, too. She lifted her skirt and dropped it behind her. "Luke's daddy is a widower. Men git tared eating their own cooking. Luke begged her to step over tonight and git their supper."

He waited, standing, to let the spite behind her words work their way in. He tried to remember what he was, that he had no right to pride, to any position; that it didn't matter if old Ada was paying the world back, through him, out of some kind of recovery of self-respect. If only she knew the truth, how she would exult. It would put such a taste in her mouth, she would go hungry all over again to savor it.

then her words at last struck home

They quickened before his eyes: Ada Belle and Luke together, the lip drawn over the tusk, leaning into her throat . . . He shut

his eyes, but the images flicked beneath the lids, fast and running together and he, now helpless to stop them, received in full measure the sting of Ada's spite. He heard her voice, "Thar's my Othel stomping in from the barn. You can pour his toddy, if you are a mind to."

He was an automaton. He poured and crossed the room and held forth the drink. She did not take it at once, and he saw she had yet more to give him. Slowly that long arm came up and took the mug. She said, "You're welcome to a bed. But you better hitch up before light and take your way. And keep it. It aint ourn."
"I can go now."

For a moment their eyes could not be parted; then there was not even an inflection of a whine, as she said, "I wouldn't turn a stray dog away on sich a night."

The blood rushed, she had named the bastard blood. His hand dug in his pocket and brought out the silver coin. He threw it, and it rang with a clear unequivocal reply upon the floor; it rolled, fell flat at her feet. "That's for my lodging then."

It struck the mark. Her insolence received its rebuke in the cold slippery glint of hatred she gave him. But only for an instant. With the greatest of ease she leaned over and picked up the coin. Her reach was so near the floor, the bend of her body seemed no more than a bow a little more formal.

She dropped the silver into her pocket as she might throw away an empty hull. "Well now," she said. "This will buy a play-pretty for Ada Belle's chap, when it comes."

Abandoned to the empty room, he felt suddenly a vast indifference. The strain of the long day, his lack of food, had at last caught up with him. He took the chair by the hearth; his body slipped into it like a lump of mud settling. Stuck fast from mortal weariness, he was too tired, even, to close his eyes. The shadowy ceiling, the black night outside, hung suspended from his weightless lids. Tomorrow's sun seemed too remote for speculation. He sank upon the ebbing lull; he felt the set of oblivion; but at the moment of

shutting up he saw, as if sound could write, Ada's words as plain as script: *A playpretty for Ada Belle's chap, when it comes.*

This quickened his sluggish blood. She had spoken as if the little harelip was already on the way. He should have asked her if she wasn't rushing things a little. The marriage bed had not yet been made. She should have spared him her insolence, made him leave. Did old Ada think, just because she had planned it, she could bring what she pleased about? Could a little bread do so much? His mouth spurted saliva; pains drew his stomach. God, he was hungry. She'd said she would lay out food and drink. He'd go eat, hitch up, and pull out afterwards. What business did he have here anyway? What could he get here he couldn't find elsewhere? How low can you fall to take umbrage from what a Rutter might say?

He picked up the lamp and went the familiar way to the kitchen. There was cold bread, he could smell the grease even before he sat down. How sweet that odor was; his ears ached from the juices flowing. He leaned over the plate and put great hunks of it into his mouth. In front stood the pitcher of buttermilk sweating on the table. Still leaning over the plate, he took it and drank deep. At last he sighed, picked up the crumbs with his fingers, flipped the small pellets into his mouth. He washed it all down with one last gulp of milk and then carefully set the pitcher back. He gave a loud belch.

"I'd as soon a body farted in my face."

He rose, turning instantaneously to face the voice. He knew even before he saw her who it was, but he was not quite prepared for what he met. It was old Ada all right, standing just outside the door to the family room; but the low ceiling which her head almost reached made her seem not only tall but portentous. At last he found his voice, "I stand corrected, but you must excuse me, if I thought I was alone." And then as sharply as he could, "But these walls no doubt have ears and eyes too, for that matter." He gave a slight bow which the lamp cast at her feet.

"Mr. Rutter craves a drop of buttermilk," she said with nicety.

"My manners seem to fail at every point. How is Mr. Rutter?"

Was it the question, or tone of voice? She seemed for a moment taken aback, but nothing showed in her reply, except he noted the whine was back. "He's wasted right smart. Bedrid and eats no more than a bird." She paused, "He'll take a sup of milk now and then."

A chill ran up his spine. All alert, standing across from her long solid shadow which blocked the door, he took in the full measure of her meaning. Was it her manner, or her voice which told him? It was as clear as if she had stated it in so many words. She was starving Mr. Rutter. She had told him she meant to let nothing stand in her way. He believed her now. Old man Nobles was a widower. Mother and daughter: father and son. She meant to make it doubly sure. What had she suffered to give her hope of reprieve in a harelip son and a small neat farm? He felt a sudden respect, compassion even, as he felt the horror. Here was one more desperate, more lost, than he. He said, "You will find me gone sooner than you think, Mrs. Rutter."

As if she were waiting for just these words, she crossed over and picked up the pitcher of milk. "Well now," she said and glanced briefly towards him. She retired with the pitcher in her long slow stride, as if she were alone with her thoughts, in an empty room. And then the door closed behind her. Not until then did he feel the humiliation; in his very presence she had effaced him from her thoughts. If she had done it deliberately it would be one thing; but to be obliterated, and by Ada Rutter . . . suddenly in the empty room he felt what she had made it, emptiness and he, somehow a ghost. He shifted his weight and felt the solid pressure; it drove up into his stomach and he tasted the heavy and nauseous grease from her bread. Anger struck like a pain, and with light tread he returned to the gate room. Quietly he rammèd to the bolt. Cousin Frankie had put it there when Eddie left her to look after the cattle. She was thinking of thieves. Well, you could be robbed and not lose a penny.

He could think now without interruption of what to do, where to go. Nothing of this came to him, nothing at all except the image

of that woman and how calmly she had contrived her husband's death, and so managed it that none would know. He had had a prescience of her malevolence that first time he saw her on the Peaks. She was equal, he saw, to any desperate act. It would be nothing for her to force Ada Belle to keep company with the Nobles boy. It had to be this, for surely Ada Belle could not . . . He would remain and find out. Maybe then some way would come to him, maybe he wanted to take her away with him. What would that do to Ada's plans? With his back to the fireplace he stood and waited, feeling the mantel board press into his shoulders.

He did not have long to wait. He heard the buggy wheels crunch to a stop, the light step upon the porch, the pause, and then the heavier clump of boots. At last the door which gave onto the porch swung in and there she was. She saw him and, scarcely pausing, turned back into the night, the door closing behind her. He heard the whispers beyond its blank face, the deeper man's voice protesting, and afterwards a long silence. He stepped forward into the middle of the floor to hear better, but no sound reached him. He stood there straining to hear but heard only the roaring of his ears until the boot heels made a solid sound, clumping away, and then silence until the buggy wheel scraped, and the sound of it starting away. But the door remained shut. She had gone with him! Numbed, his mind could not think. His senses were all used up. And he noticed afresh the hum in his head now, and he knew the wheels had passed into the vacancy of the night. He was not prepared for this, and yet old Ada had prepared him. Stuck fast to the spot, he received the knowledge of what was in store for him now, the flight of all he would wish for

and then the door fell ajar; it opened wide; Ada Belle came into the room lightly but surely.

She stood before him in all the stilled grace of an animal, so quiet her dress, of some dark purple stuff, seemed carved out of wood. Her face was thinner. Her reckless boisterous manner was

gone. The gray eyes had darkened in the dim light but they remained level and open and bigger than he had ever seen them. They did not question; they did not recriminate; they were merely aloof and waiting. In the instant he took this in he was aware that he had never really seen her. He had never looked before; he had used her. The cord in his spine loosened; the tight threads snapped everywhere in him. Her presence was like a gentle rain falling, melting the parched grounds of his being, sinking gently down. Helplessly, shamelessly, he felt the tears, the natural unbidden tears. He tasted the salt. His head lowered, for he could not stop them.

Her cool rough hands lay on each side of his face gently but firmly lifting it. He wiped his eyes, met the concern in hers. She did not need to understand his hurt; she felt its gravity, did not ask its name, knew instinctively out of some impersonal compassion its name was myriad. He felt no sting in this solicitude, only the promise of solace. He had found what now he knew he had needed all along, someone to tell what had happened to him. They were of an age; the memory of intimacies freed him of all reticence. He felt all this with a rush, his words rushed from his mouth, "I'm a bastard. I just found out. Pete Legrand's bastard." He paused, looked at her to rectify the inadequacy of language. "They told me themselves." He meant for his voice to carry the heinousness of this. It sound liked a child's.

"Hush," she said and took him by the hand. She led him to the far corner where the bed was. "Mammy aint liable to hear so far."

He sat on the bed's edge and she beside him, still holding his hand. This touching of flesh corded the comfort her manner had already given. They leaned together, her head bowed slightly and turned for listening. "Don't you see, I'm nothing. Less than nothing. Nobody. No place. Nothing. Just myself. I can't stay here. I've got to go away. You see that, don't you?"

"Where to?" she asked.

He marveled how she could lower her voice and not whisper. "Out West. Anywhere. Far away."

The flow of words had purged him. Already he felt lighter in spirit, his body resilient; then he felt the giving flesh as their shoulders touched. But her voice intruded, "You will leave your mammy?"

"She's got Pete Legrand, hasn't she?" He put all his bitterness into the tone.

"She sets a heap of store by you."

She was holding back; he saw how wide open he had laid himself; closed like a snail that's been touched. She seemed to feel the loss of sympathy and pressed his hand. He blurted out, "It's a treacherous blood. She fathered another man's child on father, on Captain Cree. My uncles too. Don't you see?" And then, "Who could know to look at her?"

"A woman finds her man. Sometimes it's a sorrow." The voice was low and tender. "A woman will all the more keep his youngon from harm."

"Do you think that's what she and Pete Legrand were thinking when they got me?"

"No, I don't, Lucius."

"Well then."

"Careless love don't think."

The comparison stung him. When would he be free of pride? But her voice was so quiet, so earnest, it plead the justice of what she'd said. He tried to accept it. She was waiting for him to respond, to say it's all the same, but he could not, not yet he couldn't. At least he could be completely candid with her; make a full confession. He said, "I drifted in here tonight, but do you ever drift? I was lost and wandering I didn't care where. I was glad though when the gate was down and I couldn't get to camp. I meant to take my pleasure. I meant to use you. Make you share what's not yours to share. And then you came in." He paused, but she did not speak. He felt her waiting for more. He hesitated, then, "You must have wondered why I dropped you. Jeff said I didn't mean to marry you. Well, I didn't." He looked quickly at her, but she showed nothing. The darkness of their corner shaded her face. He went

on, "Tonight as you stood in the door, I saw what a low bastard I am. I can't tell you what you made me feel. All of your self was there. You were sure. The smallest hair in your head, if plucked and held in the hand, would show the whole of you. I put it badly, but I had got the feeling from Ada she might be forcing you to, well, marry that—that Nobles boy." His voice was intense; it faltered, "but when I saw you, I knew nobody could make you give or withhold."

"Luke has been right kind," she said.

"Kind. But how could you with . . .?" He must not say it.

She dropped his hand and held both of hers demurely in her lap. "I taken no care on the Peaks for what I did. I was such when you come on me. I was a maid free, free with the boys, free to go or aer to come. A maid is so natured." Her voice seemed remote, not for him or any. "It is soft underfoot on the Peaks of Laurel," she resumed, "and a hiding place anywheres you step. I stepped out of my clothes with no more care than I stepped out the door. I felt no shame. The leaves was like a wrapper they growed so deep. I coupled, then swung on to the next. I was jolly and could not abide a man to sull. When one would grow jealous-hearted, I laughed and jeered that he could think he'd found me, because we had twined in the green. I took no care for what might come. I thought I took no care. I thought . . . and then I learned different."

"Yes?" he said. He leaned closer to hear.

"Mammy give me pennyroyal tea to knock it."

"To knock it?"

"And I couldn't. I felt its little head lying so close, its hair white and softer than a maid's. It was then I knowed I'd been found. It was your hair I was thinking on."

"It was what?" he whispered, rising.

"I went to the door and throwed out the tea."

He had stepped back and was looking at her shape, unrigid but upright on the bed. Her hands were still in her lap, but the head was raised now. It was not turned to him. Unsuppliant, imperme-

able, impersonal even, she seemed to be listening, as the silence drew about her like a small garment. The words filtered into this cranny of the night, stopped just beyond hearing, thinner than breath. They had not reached him yet. And then unbidden, because it was there all along, Ada's words, *Ada Belle's chap when it comes*. He half swerved and was walking towards the lamp on the mantel. He took no haste; it was all foreknown. The lamp was heavy. He did not have to lift her head; she looked into the yellow flame of the wick as into her own reflection. The smell of coal oil burned his nose and he blew out the light. He sat the lamp, smoking, onto the floor and dropped down beside her. "The poor little bastard," he said.

"It's a fair time and short," she said, "when you can be jolly."

"But he'll have his own father's name," he said, and then heard the words as if they had been repeated back to him. "I can't even give him a real name." He looked at her as if she had affronted him.

"What his daddy calls him will suit for a name," she said.

He said dully, "It won't matter, out West." And then his blood, as if up to this moment it had backed up, rushed free and pounding. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's for the man to claim his own."

"But I didn't know. How could I when you didn't tell me?"

"I meant the babe's mammy."

"Oh," he said. "Oh," helplessly, angrily, and yet he knew the anger had no point.

"I reckoned Jeff had spoke to you the way mammy done. The way little Othel would sit and dip snuff and watch."

He strained to think, but his thoughts scattered like links struck from a chain and he, blindfolded, had to reach and take what came; but it did come, and he turned upon her in a quietly fuming bafflement, "You would have fathered my child on that harelip."

She waited a moment. She spoke when he had stopped squeezing his fists in his lap. She said simply, "I didn't aim for us to beg no bread." She spoke again, seeming to remember an older far-off time, "Luke Nobles was kindly. He would stop and talk at the

gate. I got so I taken no notice of the way his lip drew back. He broke our garden. He asked me to go to meeting. His daddy loaned us an old mare for Othel to break the corn patch."

Interrupting her, he said, "Is there no end to falling?" She turned his way. "Get your things," he said wearily. "We'll go away now."

She did not answer at once, but when she spoke her voice was low but steady. "Sometimes you find your man to lose him. I don't aim to use no babe to claim a man."

"Ada Belle," he said angrily, "will you marry me?"

"I will not so vex a innocent babe."

"Get your things," he said. He was standing. "We will ride to the next county and get married. Make haste."

"I will not . . ."

"Hushup, Ada Belle. I know what I am saying when I say marry."

She seemed still to hesitate, then, "Mammy will know if I don't go to bed. We'll slip away at chicken-stealing time. Folks sleep the soundest then."

Now that it was all said and agreed, he felt such a weariness his eyes would not stay open. Docilely he put his hand to the bed and dropped down. He asked, "Will you stay with me. I don't want to be alone."

She lifted his legs, took off his shoes, and drew the thin quilt up to his chest. "No," she said kindly, "Mammy will suspicion us. You aint up to night travel. I'll wake you."

He saw her leaning over him, her fingers touch the quilt lightly; and then he felt someone shaking him. In fright he sat up in bed. "It's me," she whispered. "Don't talk. It's time to go."

He swung his legs to the side of the bed, trying to recollect where he was. He felt the cold towel moving over his face. He saw the bundle in her hand. He jumped up lest the cold ball of ice in his middle should melt and spread. . . .

They tiptoed outside, carefully crossed the porch lest the floor boards creak. He looked up and quickly spanned the sky. It was

clear now. The stars were out, sharp and still. He stopped and breathed deep. He smelled the fresh lift in the heavy staling of night. It was like spring water rising up from the bottom of a creek.

"Make haste," he said. His voice was fresh and urgent. "We must be on our way."

They had walked into Jack's house in the late morning, the third morning since their flight from the tollgate, although it seemed to Lucius as if it had been some eternal instant back of time, with a night and a day balanced between the plodding of the team and the phaeton rolling endlessly. But he had only to step down upon Cropleigh land for time and its seasons to surge afresh, and all his senses bound upwards like a body breaking water. They walked into the temporary abandonment which a country house has in the spring, when even the women will leave it for the garden or chicken yard, and the vibrant cleansing air filters the silence of the empty rooms with a brightness as much of sound as of light, and the ears hum as from the low winter voices seeping out of the walls. He faltered in his step, overwhelmed by the heavy sweet draw of nostalgia, for none of this would he know again. Ada Belle followed cautiously, glancing covertly about her. They went straight to the family room, and she stopped shyly in its center. "Men don't keep too clean a house," he said to put her at her ease. She gave a small tight smile; he noticed she had lost her natural grace. Her eyes fastened upon his in frank appeal. "I won't be long," he said. "Sit down. Make yourself at home."

"What'll I say if his nigger cook finds me here?"

"You don't have to say anything," he said sharply. "Or that I brought you. You are waiting for me." She shrank as if he had struck her. He took her in his arms. Her clasp was too desperate. "Now then," he said. "It's all right." His mouth at her ear, "You are my wife. This is my uncle's house." But she did not release him, who had been so sure and self-reliant in the first stages of their flight. She had even slipped out to the barn to feed the team

before she had awakened him, so there would be no delay, and afterwards sat demurely beside him as they drove onto the pike, under the dark sky. They did not speak, but when the sun came up in the saffron sky and the dew was thick upon them he leaned over and kissed her. It was broad light when they had passed this very farm and the sun well up as he trotted by his mother's place, holding the reins up, erect and almost not breathing. He even thought he heard a voice hailing him.

He had meant to go the back way but had no money. The very ease with which he could get it in town, where it was known Mr. Legrand was backing him, brought him up against the facts of his situation. The West, what was it? It gave him no clear image. He had acted impulsively, but he knew there was no turning back. This was clear, as the wheels rolled through the familiar countryside, the first stage into the strange and unknown. He had to tell himself over again the facts, the incontrovertible facts, before he could steel himself, and he discovered he must never look back or feel back either, except for once. Jack would have to lend him the money. He would have to go to Jack for one last time. . . .

Taking the long way to the next county seat, into the knobby land of the Rim, it was supper time before they got it all done, bought the license, found a preacher to marry them. He had gone to the livery stable to put up the team and when he got back to the inn, he couldn't even remember its name now, she was standing as he had left her, in the middle of the floor, pale and yet not distraught, her eyes widened upon the spot of flaked paint which he had stood before as the door closed, as if her stare by some magic, if it did not deviate, would bring him again. Well, it brought him, and they had clasped then as now, and he had tried to think what it meant, forsaking all others, but heard instead the weary tones of the man of God, until their bodies began to speak another truth. But how he was beginning to know what it meant to forsake and be forsaken. He held her hard against him, to ask forgiveness for his irritability and for a moment pity bound them together, but she was his wife now dammit. She would have to get

used to servants. In exasperation he freed his arms and led her to a chair. At the door he said, schooling his face and voice, "I'll be right back."

"I'm near perished for a sup of water," she said.

On the kitchen porch, where the cedar bucket always stood, he felt a momentary twinge of recognition and loss. Slacken the will ever so little and the betraying eye will take you unawares. It was hard enough without every insignificant object to bind afresh what he had already loosed. A streak of cedar oil curled on the surface of the half-filled bucket, fragile as threads of silk, its dull iridescence giving to the water a darker richer seeming. He noticed his throat was dry. "Wait," he said. "I'll draw a fresh bucket," but her hand was already lifting the dipper. She drank thirstily, flung the dregs into the yard. A chicken squawked and jumped out of the way. She handed him the dipper; he plunged it into the tepid water, sipped slowly like a horse; tasted the flat aromatic flavor, wondering why water out of cedar seemed not only to quench but nourish too. With relief he saw the kitchen was empty. "You can find your way back?" he asked.

"Lucius," she touched his arm.

"Yes?" She had recovered her poise. The simple dress showed again all her natural grace. In the sharp balm of the spring air he felt his blood leap, and he sought her eyes which had already found his.

"Remember?" she asked.

"Do you think I could forget when I made you my wife?"

That first night in the traders' inn at Macon, he had in the brief assuaging, almost brutal kind of frenzy turned away into oblivion. The next morning she was already dressed as she broke his sleep. When he saw her awkward before the strange place, he closed his eyes and swung to the side of the bed in that drop of despair before the finality of all that had happened. She turned away to let him dress, and he recovered himself. They were the first down to breakfast, and she had minced at her food, her head bent over the plate, but he ate ravenously. He tried to hide her bundle

of clothes as he checked out, coldly formal, but the clerk's leer spitted him between the shoulder blades as they walked the long lobby, Ada Belle behind him like a mountain woman. He held the door for her; she hesitated; he saw how ridiculous they must seem to the clerk, frowned, and she at last sidled through.

This time he took the back way, and when in the afternoon he saw the turn-off to Seven Springs, he turned off to go there. At first he'd only thought he could not bear to spend the night at Jack's, but then as they drove over the rocky road, he knew they needed to be alone together, without haste, before he presented himself to his kinsman. It was out of season and Mrs. Haskins seemed reluctant to take them in. He was frank and brief in his appeal. "Your poor mother," she had said and sighed; and then, "Of course, Lucius," looking away to prepare her face. But she was curious, too. She looked sharply at Ada Belle as he introduced her for the first time to anyone as his wife, and the old woman's sight hazed over, not out of wisdom, nor in pity or compassion either but in a kind of slow amazement that, beyond surprise, she could still be surprised. When she and Ada Belle were making the bed and sweeping the room, he hung about trying to help until she turned in exasperation, "Will you go on down to the springs, or somewhere and quit hindering us?" "Yes, ma'm," he said.

The springs were rocked up like wells, all in a row beneath the perpendicular ledge of rock and dirt; he leaned over the black water of the first one, smelled the faint odor of rotten eggs. That was the black sulphur. He idled down to a sweeter water and drank. It was all deserted and he thought how gay it was in season when the families for miles around, after laying-by time, would come to drink the waters, and the piles of golden fried chicken, the promenading and dancing—his father and mother had always led off the first set—the long verandahs, the women starched, rocking and gossiping, the men playing horseshoes or cards . . . It was all deserted now, and the air seeping in from the woods and ridges overlay the old hotel like a slow decay. He sat down upon a dusty bench and wondered what he was doing here. Then he heard the light footfall. It was Ada Belle running down to join him.

She came towards him, eyes shining with all their old abandon, but even as she ran her motion was somehow subdued. He saw he had much to thank Mrs. Haskins for. He took her hand and they strayed into the woods and picked wild honeysuckle for their marriage cell. He had thought then, If only this could last, and they keep in the stillness of these woods, empty of humankind, wandering as through one eternal moment, unvexed by time, the seasons changing surreptitiously as upon the eye of an animal, and he and she passing as through one long day until, together, eyelids fluttering each to each, they would drop like a leaf to the ground. But he knew better. No such seasons passed here. They would shift in their flagrant violence or mildly; bring The Season to Seven Springs, bring the women rockers to the verandah, whose appraising glance lifted from book or sewing or the catch in talk would shrink all the invisible multifarious extravagance of sap and leaf and bole to scenery. And against this spectacle pin Ada Belle like a butterfly to the wall. No, the place was forbidden them, but the Now was not forbidden. He watched Ada Belle run ahead for one last spray of honeysuckle. All blossom and no leaf in the burgeoning woods, it turned the trees suddenly bare. He called to her to go back

he hung the dipper to its nail on the post on Jack's back porch; he said, "What the honeysuckle did to that bare room."

She replied with the secret smile which softened but did not open the lips, the smile which, turning to him, she gave, after supper at Mrs. Haskins' and the steep walk down the hill to the empty hotel below, passing all the vacant rooms to come to that one room, theirs for the night, prepared so hastily for their nuptials, and which they entered so awkwardly together. For a moment he felt lurking ghosts in all these empty rooms; then he lit the lamp. As the oval flame sank slowly into the wick, the darkness faintly began to glow; then growing into it the sprays of honeysuckle, their blossoms scattering, yet hovering like a swarm of bees in that stillness when the frantic wings, at day dawn, thicken the air as with the last smear of night and then, all golden motion, swerve into

flight. She turned then with that smile and he, all giddy, leaned towards her.

It was not like the guilty furtive haste of the other times, on the Peaks of Laurel or in the rough shack at the lumber camp. But what was it then? He looked at his wife now in the late morning, on Jack's sagging porch, for an affirmation of the meaning he had come to—was it only last night?—but she was already turning from him, to wait in the house until he would do his business, her poise restored—when? how?—already accepting whatever he would ask of her. She would sit in the very chair he had chosen, in that suspension of motion which was more than patience . . . but what would be her thoughts?

Had she known what he had known, and does that knowing make one of two? Or does daylight always make falter what the night brings? Do we marry by day and love by night? He leaned his hand against the post and shut his eyes. Nothing came into the vacancy he had willed . . . and then, as he waited, it returned, that sight of truth but a veiled truth, from the night before. No, it was not returning; it was there. It was there upon the dark mirror back of his eyes, less an image than a lambent breath, that awareness which *is*, hovering the light sleep which divides to join the shuddering dissolutions of the blood, an awareness of the quiet of bodies entwined in a single touch; yet he unfeeling felt not touch but a flesh unfleshed. He thought, It is the blood sleeping. It is dangerous to think: she sighed, she moved, and in all its weight he felt her body, his own lying sodden against it. He smelled the sweat of love, drying into the stale unsunned mattress upon which he had laid her down. Carefully then he disentangled himself, got up and lit the lamp. Standing by the bed, he looked down upon the woman who was now his wife. He saw only a body in the repose of sleep, untied into a naturalness remote and separate, for even his eyes were spent. He whispered, Was that it, what I just felt, two made one? Or is this it, what I now see? Does wholeness come, and go in the instant of sleep waking? When he knew that no answer could come, he blew out the light and lay back down,

away from her, his hands crossed on his chest. But later, in the last quarter of the night, as day slipped like another rung of shutters into the blinds, he turned again into her arms, again into time's delusion, as if into its extirpating ecstasy he could sink the day. But it was only to fall away again, and the day was there, leaking fast into the room

the day. He received it again, now in its full presence. Standing upon Jack's porch, he looked into the back yard, into the brightness ruffling the air . . . when around the corner of the kitchen a figure burst into view, dressed in a calico dress and sunbonnet, but with a man's height and shape. At first he thought: Ada Rutter. Instantly he knew better. Nothing could disguise that stride and that carriage. It was Jack. But what was Jack doing in a woman's clothes?

He stepped down to go meet him. Without breaking stride his uncle veered in all his urgency and came up to Lucius. He did not greet him but grasped his shoulders as one might catch a body teetering at the edge of some high place. He fastened upon his nephew a scrutiny anxious and direct. Lucius, staring into the slatted bonnet, felt the shock as when looking down a well you see yourself where you are not. All the suspense that Jack had suffered seized them both in that immediacy of feeling when all is asked and nothing can reply. And so they stood, their eyes hooked together, neither able to free the other. Then Jack's grip made him wince. Slowly Jack lifted his hands as from something he had just broken; more slowly the reaming gaze. Lucius, in a sad mockery of their banter, "Old woman, can you tell me where Jack Croleigh is?"

Jack's features relaxed, but they did not resume quite their familiar look. "Yes," he said. "Where a man always hopes to find himself. Inside a woman's plackets."

"Can you kiss your own lips, too?"

Jack swept the bonnet across his chest and bowed, dragging his foot. "The scholar at last is worthy of his teacher." Straightening up, "Where have you been?"

"I've been there. And I'm on my way again."

"Come into the office. I'll disrobe and talk man to man."

They had crossed the yard in a vacuum of feeling, so that upon the threshold, in that instant of vision in which he paused, what Lucius saw struck with all the violence of a spiritual vertigo. The room looked like a whirlwind had flung a gear room into a study. Broken hames, pieces of machinery, double shovel points, bolts and nuts were scattered all over the floor. A cross-cut saw leaned against the desk piled high with seed catalogues and skin-bound volumes open and face down sliding down the pile. A strong breath would bring it down. A bottle of neat's foot oil had been kicked over and lay abandoned inside its wide dark stain. The books lay upon the shelves as if they had been flung there, some straight, some leaning, some piled precariously on top of cotton samples. In the middle of the floor stood a bucket of grease into which three corn knives had been stuck. The office had always had the disarray of a place where an action never ends, but this disorder was abandonment. Jack leaned over to lift his boots out of the dress. "Sit down," he said.

Lucius pushed a saddle out of the old leather chair. He sat on its edge as if he had only a moment to stay. He felt he had to say something, anything; he said, "What were you doing in that get-out?"

Jack hung the dress and bonnet carefully on a nail in the wall; then he turned, his head bent regarding his boots. The constraint grew unbearable. At last he raised his head, but he did not look directly at Lucius. "Trying to be like everybody else. Get rich fast on work not my own."

"So you've taken to whoring."

Now Jack saw him, and gratefully as if Lucius had just given him his cue for a role he had forgotten. "No," he said. "I've just laid aside the raiment of a ceremony, the social meaning of which mankind has all but forgotten. And me along with the others until that old Christian, the jackass, in his own way acted up to remind me. I'm speaking of marriage. I've just bred a jack who insisted upon restoring to ritual its meaning. It's only the beast who can come to it in the full light of day, without shame, as he performs

any natural act. After how many revolutions of the sun and moon I don't know, for I'm poor at mathematics, but the time was when man made a little progress towards the recovery of what he had lost. And this could be seen in marriage, which means we no longer run in packs. That is, mankind had come to accept coupling as not entirely a private matter but a neighborhood affair first of all, and the bride and groom were brought to bed, from kings on down, in a fairly public way. At night, it's true, because of our fallen state, but only after the long day's ceremony, in sight of and with the help of kin and neighbors and all the rough play and ribaldry, just so the burning couple, once they were behind the locked door, would remember in between times that it had been done before, when they would be tempted to say this is ours and nobody else's. Now it's coming to be just that, and the happy couple wants to run away and hide, to say it's all ours, putting up with a ceremony that makes no more sense to them than last year's dead skin. Well, as I said I bought this jack from two sisters up on the Rim and advertised him well: service twenty-five dollars, widows' mares free. I thought that the right touch. If anyone complained of the fee, he could tell himself he was doing his bit for charity, at the same time he was getting the best just a little cheaper, for he would already have discounted charity from the fee. Well, the jack refused to serve. I've been to school to jacks all my life, and I'm still learning. I knew he wasn't no slow jack, for I'd seen him perform. So I sat down to think, as you will do with that concentration which only the loss of a big piece of money can bring you to. And it came to me: the sisters always handled the jack themselves. Being a stickler for ceremony he was going to have no part in what must have seemed to him a clandestine abduction. He would stand, he was telling me, but in none of this fly-by-night, shameful running and hiding. He had to see the true cloth. But how was I to get the widow out of her barn lot into mine, since she wasn't mentioned in the bill of sale? Knowing the jackass as I know myself, I risked being called one, but what is that but two legs trying to keep the pace of four . . . ?"

"So you traded for her clothes?"

"Down to the snuffbox in her pocket. And I wore them too, with that gift for perfection which I have, unwashed."

"And it worked?"

"Oh, works and faith. Listen. Aint you learned yet the success of any performance is belief. I became the widow. I took to dipping snuff, not when I went into the barnyard but when I got up in the morning, to give the juices time to swap, and roll them under my tongue like she done and think—Thar's twenty-five more dollars. It's true I was two foot taller, but I gambled on that, thinking as the jack must think as he stood in the confusion of change that the widow had changed too, for who will say a jack does not hope to come upon his miracle as well as another? But most of all I relied on the sense of smell. I knew that he would get the whiff, it was smothering me, that old dry acrid scent, and feel all right about it. Later of course the odors would swap and mine come out on top. . . ." Jack broke off abruptly. He picked up his chair and sat it down close to Lucius and looked hard at him. "Son," he said gently, "are you all right? Was it too bad, finding out?"

Now Lucius dropped his eyes. "Uncle Jack, I'm going West. I'll need some money. Will you lend me some?" The silence lasted so long Lucius looked up, not knowing what to expect, scared even at the thought that Jack might refuse him. He saw a countenance weary from sadness and compassion, but he saw most of all a man in his prime. He had always thought him old.

"Son," Jack said quietly, and this was shock enough, "there's one thing about flight. It can't flee. You run to the end of the world and back, but sometimes you've got to stop. And there you were all along."

A little desperately, "I've got to go."

"There's another thing. Pete Legrand and your mother are married. It's not what he'd thought it to be, and as to your mother, well, they did it to make up to you . . ."

"That's fine," he interrupted. "Maybe Lucius Legrand in nine months will come bouncing. But Lucius Cree is a bastard."

"We are all bastards," Jack said and his voice had recovered its familiar tone. "Self-appointed at that. We've been bastards since we first ran into the bushes to hide and heard that voice, that terrible voice, *Who told thee that thou wast naked?*"

He turned his head impatiently, as one does in a fever, "I've got to go, Uncle Jack."

"Listen. You've just changed clothes. No matter where you are, you've got to learn to wear them. Do you think it will be any easier out West? For there you'll pretend you haven't changed at all until the day, and the day will come when some poor bastard running too will find you, for misery always finds its own, and to ease his own hurt will greet you—Oh, yes, Lucius Cree. And how is your mother? The old story beginning over and over again, for there's only one, beginning with the words, *Eritis sicut dii*, not the Word, not the etymon but the multiplication of its derivatives. Put them in any combination you will, and I've tried them all, they never are; they only derive. That's why I'm done with words. I thought I had said my last, but you are hearing them now. You know what the whirlwind said to Job? Everybody knows that, but who gets the point of the narrative? Bereft of everything but his wife, who was kept at his side just to remind him, did Job go to and fro in the earth, or walk up and down in it? And that's the point of the story. That was the temptation, and Job knew it and Satan knew it, and God knew it beforehand. No. Job sat down in his ashes and rent the last suit of clothes left him. He complained, and who wouldn't half naked and running with boils and having to listen to Bildad the Shuhite and Eliphaz the Temanite and Zophar, who tore their clothes too but could well afford to do it and who dressed before they came, no doubt, in their second-best. But did Job run away? He didn't. He sat there with the pus from his boils gumming up the ashes, naked enough to show his corruption common to all, defending himself against man and God, in his own neighborhood, before his own wife. But did they get the point? They did not. There's one thing we can't stand, and that's nakedness. If you don't believe it just take off your clothes some day

and walk into town, if you get that far. Whatever covers us makes us aware of what we've lost, and I'm not just talking of fig leaves and all the fashions since, but of all the conventions and institutions, everything that constrains the natural man and makes him aware of his neighbors, and so aware of himself and his peril. That's why God spoke out of the wind. If Job had been running, do you think he would have heard, or God spoken? And you, what have you lost? Your sons, your money? Have you got boils, or a wife?"

Lucius had wrenched himself to his feet. He was trembling and pale. "I can't," he said. "Maybe if it was just me. But I'm not alone."

"God amighty," Jack said, and he lifted himself like a heavy weight out of his chair. He flung his long hair out of his face. "Wait. You don't have to tell me. God amighty, you've married a Rutter. And I thought you were a man. And here you were, sucking your little hurt like a sore thumb and thinking how best to get back at your mother, who God knows has suffered enough for sins not her own, with no fault of hers to blame her. To think of all the words I've wasted on you, all the breath, and care, yes, and anguish too, and for what? A little puppy's found life aint all teaty." He stopped for breath, but his eyes did not stop.

"Uncle Jack." Lucius was frightened now.

"Don't ask me for pity. Don't ask me for money either. Don't . . ."

"Uncle Jack, my child is going to have its father's name."

Jack's eyes cleared and he was staring at his nephew as down a long spiral the end of which he was trying to find. He took a step towards the boy; then turned and walked towards the hearth. He looked at it a moment and then went back and picked one of the corn knives out of its grease, methodically cleaned the blade between his fingers and kneeled down, prizing the hearthstone up. He reached under it and brought out a bag of money. The stone fell back with a hollow clap. He took his foot and pushed it in place.

"It's not only," Lucius said heavily, "it's not only because she's carrying my child. I . . . I, well, she's my wife. I wanted her, too, I . . ."

Jack went to the bookshelves, looked up and down them, took out a book and reached behind it and brought out a snuff can. He twisted the top and poured double eagles into his hand. Carefully he put them back, counting them, and then he fastened the lid. He walked over behind Lucius, but Lucius did not turn to see. And so it was only his voice which the boy heard, "Where is your wife?"

Ada Belle got up awkwardly and tried to smile. Jack went directly to her, made an old-fashioned bow, dragging his foot; then he leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. He walked to the table, but her blushes as he turned away grew more furious. He set the moneybag down and beside it the snuffbox, and beside that a moneybelt. "There it is," he said, "the choice. There's never but one." And waited, watching them both.

Lucius walked to the table and slowly emptied the bag and began putting the coins into the belt, but his hands were trembling and he was clumsy at it.

"I've learned," Jack said, and Lucius knew it was his farewell to him, for the old voice of passionate rebellion and irony was spent, "that the hardest thing you can try to do is advise another in matters that count. And I'm not going to do it. The best we can do is perform a few small services and be damned careful about those. But I'm going to talk to Ada Belle, because you have made her your equal now, and one obligation of marriage is to confer and decide together. I want to define for her the alternatives. You've got to either stay or go. If you go West, remember few ever return."

"We don't mean to," Lucius said.

"I aint talking to you now. What the West means to you is a place to hide. That's what you think it will be, but let me tell you, once you start running, it's like lying: one flight begets

another, and it will bring you both right back to where you started from. That's when one of you will run away from the other. And if you think it's a lighter run, just look behind you if you can. I talked to a sawyer for a big outfit in Mississippi who'd had to kill a man. You know what he said to me—I can't look behind me. He's right back of my shoulder."

"This is hardly murder."

"You think it aint. Now Ada Belle, that's one choice. I've described its mildest possibilities. Not to speak generally but of the place itself. The American West is a rough place, beyond law or order, except brute force, which is to say it's the land of the beast. The other choice you have may seem harder, for it's right here at home. With everybody looking and the Bildads multiplied to the county's lines. Lucius is a bastard of a good family. You, Ada Belle, are legitimate, but you come of an outcast family, which is to say for Lucius's kin and acquaintance social bastardy. Now don't get huffed up. This is the one time for plain speaking. Lucius is not going to make old Ada welcome, and it's going to be hard for his mother to welcome you. She'll try to be civil, I'm not even sure of that, for you are the woman that's ruined her son besides taking him away from her, which any wife will do and no mother can ever quite forgive. What you are in for, if you stay, will make even the devil weep. But watch those tears. They are the tears of self-pity. And then you are lost sure enough. I could go on. What do you think, Ada Belle?"

Lucius had paused in putting away the money, and he turned to her as quickly she sought his eyes. What he saw gave him a sudden lift of courage. He picked up a coin and pushed it into its right slot in the belt. "Mr. Jack," she said, "it's for Lucius to say."

"Of course. Can't I ever learn anything? Hit's fer the man to say, or by God he'll knock her in the head with a stick of stove wood. For a man has got to be a man somewhere. And that's all you know or ever have known, girl, old Nate scratching ground not his own, wearing it out, plowing it too wet, with no feeling of responsibility except for his share, and when somehow he can't

manage to get all of that, knocking down the bedstead, throwing the children in with the bedclothes, with two or three chairs tied on behind with a plowline, and a double shovel sticking up behind like some rare obscenity, for who ever saw horns growing in the rear, and you lying somewhere in the wagon with a piece of cold pone in your mouth, looking around like a child lost at sea, and the woman trying to step over the wheels, already turning, to her seat up front, with the baby hanging to the teat by its gums and wishing it had teeth, and the rooster in its crate of hens hanging from under the back wheels crowing the new day in. A diet too rich will bring a flux to the bowels, but too much sorrow goes finally to the head, and the teeth shed like pearls. Sorrow is the one thing we don't have to take on faith."

He stopped, and the stillness hummed in the room, and the motes of dust danced, quickening in the sunlight from the east window. "Uncle Jack, if we can just go away for a while and be with ourselves . . ."

"I know. You will work it out. I know, you aint heard a word I said."

"Yes, Uncle Jack, I have. But if we stay, what name can I stay under? Lucius Legrand? Shame them both, and publicly? Or Lucius Cree, and live a lie?"

"No, you can't do that," Jack said, his voice flat, reasonable, almost indifferent, turning away as if he had said all he would say, or had to say and had now washed his hands of the matter, looking through the west window which gave onto the open fields, and the fields running flat in the center of his vision but rising at either end gradually into rolling land, so that where his focus lay, determined by the shape of the terrain, his sight was directly towards the Cree farm, down the lane which joined it to his by the back way, twice as short as by the pike. "No," he repeated. "You can't do that, but the name is the crux of the business, the paradox you can never escape or ever solve. But if you stay here, you and Ada Belle, you will have it, and you will know what your agony has brought you to and so can try to handle it, and your

child will be born into it and grow out of it into his own, which will not be yours but his own, and he will have a name in his own right, for memory is short, that last spasm of the dead for life. There's hope in that. You've been christened. You've got a name."

His back was still turned away from them, but even before he resumed, it was plain he was talking to himself now, and Lucius could only think that his back, large and muscled and yet in perfect proportion to his form, was equal to almost any load. "Don't ever fall into an open grave. It gives you visions. I know what I can never tell. God said before the world was, I am. And somewhere in Proverbs, that love is a divine play. Brought to earth, it's a mighty rough game and no holds barred. That's the game you are called on to play, son, and win or lose, it's for keeps. But not here, or so we are told. You play here, but the score is settled elsewhere. And then it ceases being a game. Open the side and out pours blood and water: blood that ever thirsts; water that never quenches. Oh, those words. Are they two thousand years old? Are they now? *I thirst*. It is better in the French, *J'ai soif*. Agape all agape. And up swings the sponge and the lips fasten upon the one drink that quenches, matter brought to its essence, and the ghost gives up on that, all the world upon the tip of God's tongue. If you don't believe it, stir the bottom of a vinegar barrel, and see what comes up, the old mother done with her work. That one taste, the one in all, vinegar in hyssop, the world purified into the Word's one shape. Is that history? Or is it eternity? Is the game finished? Love begun?"

Ada Belle was twisting her hands, leaning her head forward and the eyes brooding. When Jack stopped, as if it had released them, she slowly dropped her hands to her sides. "Mr. Jack," she said quietly, "I don't rightly understand what you say."

Jack was turning his head from the west window to the east and back again. All alert, as if he had just awakened out of a light sleep, "You don't have to. You aint got time to. There's your mother, Lucius, dismounting in the back yard and John running to take her horse." He turned to the east window. "And old Ada coming up the drive in Frankie's buggy behind a horse stuffed

with sawdust that must have springs to move him, for he'll just about make it to the horse block. And from the looks of both, Ada's already been to your mother's, the one after what she's got and don't know it; the other coming here to prevent what she don't want but already has and don't know it. Confuse the tongues as you will, they speak one vernacular, ways and means to folly. As you see, choice don't take place in a vacuum. And that's what you've got, son. Choice."

Lucius had moved out into the room. It took only a glance each way to see. "I'll tell them," he said hurriedly. "It's done, and on my own choice. Nobody made me. Nobody can make me do what I've already done. Nobody. I'll tell them that, too. And, Uncle Jack, you stay out of it."

"I've been out of it. Can't you understand nothing?" And then, "This is still my house. I'll go invite old Ada in. Your mother knows the way," and he started for the door. "Give them time to get seated, and me time to supervise the amenities. And if you try to slip out and leave me . . ."

"Listen, Uncle Jack. When I leave, you'll know it."

"The dining-room door into the parlor has lost its knob. It makes a good round hole to see through. The door stands ajar, too. You won't have no trouble getting in." He looked at the boy and frowned, "And rub a little color in your cheeks."

"You needn't to worry about that either."

"All right. I just don't want it to get around that I can raise the dead. I still can't live it down that I've resurrected myself."

"Well, stay out of graves then."

"Well, just don't you dig me one. Let all things come in due season."

And Jack was gone from the door, and for a moment the room seemed an emptiness folding in upon itself. Swiftly, to restore motion, Lucius crossed over to his wife. She met him halfway. He said, "We'll have to go in together. You're with me in this?"

"I mislike it, Lucius. Mammy's done brought little Othel, and he aint got right good sense."

"We can't help that now."

"I mislike it."

"What's Othel got to do with it?"

"Nothing as I can say. But he aint got right good sense."

"You've said that."

"Just don't say nothing out of the way."

"I'm not. I'm just going to tell them, that's all. Let's go."

"Thar's all that money a-laying there."

"Nobody'll bother it. I haven't time to put it in the belt."

"Take the belt then and what's in it."

"Oh . . . all right."

But he couldn't get it fastened and Ada Belle had to buckle it on for him. As they were crossing the hall, Lucius heard his mother's voice calling Jack.

They had reached the dining room at exactly the right moment. Just as he was placing himself before the knob hole, he heard Jack say something and he leaned forward to see them enter like actors upon a stage. They arranged themselves, as if their positions had been rehearsed, Jack in front of the mantel, Ada to Lucius's left, little Othel peeping from behind her skirts. His mother crossed to a chair to his right, and he withdrew an inch from the hole. It seemed so large and he all exposed. She passed across his eyes like the touch of a stroking hand. He saw afresh how supple and trim she was, the walk he knew so well light and sure; he saw how easily she seated herself, and the haughty lift of the head. It had always been there; only he had never seen that before.

"Take a seat," Jack said.

Ada looked hesitantly behind her. She lifted her skirt and sat forward on the edge of the chair, using only so much of it and no more, her posture showing she would be so far beholden in this house. For a while they kept this tableau, as if in the scene the action was already contained and it only awaited some prompting. Then Jack spoke, making a short bow to both, "I'm at your service, ladies. As you know, I'm the water witch can find what's lost underground."

"Oh, hush, Jack," his mother said.

"I'm afeard, Mr. Jack, that what I'm after is atop ground. And it aint lost, but it's sure loose."

"Then you won't need my talents," he said.

His mother, erect but not stiff, leaned slightly forward. "Brother Jack, Mrs. Rutter here has just told me the most distressing thing, if it's true . . ."

"Oh, hit's true," Ada said.

He marveled at the way his mother's manner seemed to banish Ada's presence, taking her interruption as if it were only a pause in breath, "that Lucius has gone somewhere with her girl. Oh, when he left the house, he was distraught, not responsible . . ." and she stopped.

"It'll come to the boy. I aim to see to it, it does." Slowly Ada now looked to Jack. "Ada Belle, Mr. Jack, is three months on the way."

"Brother Jack, you've got to do something."

"They aint but one thing to be done. I'm aiming for Lucius to marry Ada Belle."

"That's out of the question." His mother tossed the words as she might to a child who has interrupted.

"Pore folks has their feelings, too, Miss Jule."

Now his mother turned and looked across the space towards Ada. "I'm sure you are overwrought at what has happened. We all are. And I can understand he might have been equal to this folly. Lucius has had, well, he was not quite himself when you took him in that night, and it was kind of you, but if your daughter would go away with Lucius, she would do the same with others. . . . Three months ago. No, it's not possible."

"The boy come by it natural enough, Miss Jule."

His mother stiffened as if a hot iron had touched her; all the blood rushed out of her face; her feet pressed into the rug to rise but she only grew more still, and before that stillness, which was the final strain of a courage to show nothing, Ada's malice recoiled. The glittering eyes clouded as from her own venom.

Lucius tried to rise, to rush into the parlor; but he felt if he looked away, his mother's frail stricken elegance, holding like a figure of glass already shattered, would fall. Instinctively he shifted, but carefully, his sight to Jack; but Jack, too, was helpless before her helplessness, before a love which would offer the solace of itself, but chained as the object is drawn away from its own fixity, and sight reaches out to touch but can only see. But at last he spoke, and the rich tones of sorrow beyond despair fell upon the room like balm which can only dull, not heal, "Once upon a time, long ago in a far country it began, the story, and the protagonists were heroes, and the gods their adversaries. Then the Furies turned into Eumenides and the tale tragic and death purged us. Now we only suffer anticlimax, the common whine which was there all along, sometimes called the way of the world."

Ada's head nodded and swayed as if in agreement. She said, "Ada Belle has knowed boys before she taken to Lucius"—her voice, as if for proof, had resumed its old whine, unresonant as a dull file, as persistent—"I never claimed the girl was all pure. Pore folks is due a little something. And Lucius's seed caught, and what she's a-toting is his'n. We never aimed to lay it to him"—she paused to make this fairness clear—"but a bastard and hit's mammy aint got much show, the way things is. A right clever boy, of the name of Nobles, taken to sparking Ada Belle, and he would have married her. The little chap would a had a home. But Luke said so long at it was only him that knowed, folks might lay it to him as his own. But he didn't want no share of it now. If Lucius had a done like he said he would and gone away, why then Luke Nobles . . ."

"Mammy, whar's the son of a bitch?" Little Othel said suddenly. "You said we'd jump him here."

As he bounded up, Lucius had the sense of knowing that these were the words he had been waiting for. He merely looked to Ada Belle, then took her hand and pushed open the dining-room door. They walked into the rise of Ada's voice, "Why, Othel man, is them pretty words . . ." and then there was the long space, the long base of the triangle where they would stand. All the eyes

were upon them even before they paused. In the silence Ada Belle came up beside him, on his left. She was watching her mother and brother. He looked directly at his uncle, as so many times in the past, but this time not for guidance. He saw that he had made it clear to Jack, who gave him a slight smile. But the lips, he saw, were set.

"Thar now, son," Ada spoke. She did not try to disguise her triumph. "I said right. Thar he is, and thar is Ada Belle. Lucius . . ."

"Just a minute, Mrs. Rutter," he interrupted. "I have something to say," but he looked not her way but still at Jack. "It won't take long, what I'm to say. That is, I'm a man now, fully responsible for what I do. I marry or anything else I do, I do it on my own. Nobody can make me marry or do anything . . ."

"You Othel," Ada Belle cried and stepped in front of Lucius, as his uncle bounded from the hearth in front of her; half turned as from a blow. Then he heard the explosion. He thought he heard his mother scream. In the after-clap of silence he thought, *Nothing has happened*, when Jack gave a slight backward lurch as if he were drunk, stood before them a moment and, waving his right hand behind him for support, fell with a solid impact upon the parlor floor. The prisms in the hanging lamp tinkled furiously, and then all sound rushed out of the room. Every eye was fastened to the floor, before the long shape of the man stretched out before them. Into the vacuum of the quiet the straining breath intruded; then slowly Jack pushed up on his right arm. He wavered, and his sister Julia in that moment, rushing and kneeling behind him in one movement, placed his head upon her breast. "Oh, somebody do something," she said and burst into tears; as quickly the tears stopped.

"What did you git in the way fur, Mr. Jack?" Othel said petulantly.

The high toneless voice released them. Lucius whirled, Ada Belle was moving towards her mother, and there was John Greer. He had just wrenched the horse pistol from little Othel's hand. His other hand rested lightly on the boy's shoulder as if he were balancing him. He was staring down at Jack with the disbelief

of a man just come upon a miracle and would like to come closer to make sure. It was from behind then that Lucius heard Jack's old familiar voice but it was speaking already as from a distance, "Don't blame the child-man. But take away his toy. When he grows up, he might hurt somebody."

And Lucius was on his knees before the long body, trying to decide where best to take hold and lift him to his feet. He seemed too big to lift. "Go away. Go away," his mother said angrily. "Haven't you done enough?" Bewildered, he looked up at his mother, affronted that she could be so unjust. Jack tried to wink at him, but the eyes went out of focus. This frightened him, and he drew back. Ada Belle softly called his name and he got up and went docilely towards her. Upon the floor the pool of blood was spreading momentarily. His eyes traveled to the source, the hole in Jack's side, welling up darkly. A shred of cloth rolled lightly upon it, quivered in the long shudder working its way down the tremendous length of the body.

Jack spoke suddenly, "There, little sister, now don't you cry . . ." and rolled his head slowly against her breast, lifting his chin as if he could find her face; but the chin fell and his head sank into the breast as if at last he had found a place of perfect comfort. It rested there only a moment. With a small jerk he freed himself and looked down at his side. "See," he said in wonder

See the words run out of my side!
 Why was I not put to sleep to dream this?
 Bleeding breath, oh, breathy blood
 What a grave gravity is in your fall.
 It will leave a stain worth all the books.
 Look at it sometimes, girl, when you sweep
 And remember Jack Croleigh
 Who learned life by heart.
 Learning is a surfeit.
 Let it spill.

Christ! This cannibal world.

The legs pushed forward as against some obstacle; his chin rose level with his forehead; the lips moved soundlessly. And then from his eyes there sped a light, in a perfect focus upon some point above, both luminous and sharp. After a while it could be seen its concentration was too perfect.

Julia, startled by the quiet, lifted her head and looked reprovingly at those standing before her. As if this were his signal, John Greer tiptoed by them and stopped before the body. "I take him now," he said.

Lucius and Mr. Legrand were standing in sight of the tree which had killed Captain Cree. They were in hearing of the gentle, soothing rhythm of the saw turning it into logs. They had just returned from the site Lucius had chosen for the mill in the east end of the timber. The two men watched the sawyers in silence, and the workmen aware of their presence increased slightly their swing. Mr. Legrand said, looking before him, "I'll send over tomorrow my teams to begin picking up the lumber. I'd like to get started rebuilding the mill and gin."

"Any time, sir," Lucius said. "The mill hands will be idle, that is most of them, while Peter dismantles the mill."

"It will be a good time to take up that bill to Parsons and Jones."

"They'll send a man out here next week," Lucius said. "I expect you'll be needing some of the money I owe you."

"That's all right. Take your time."

The sawyers stopped to wedge the log. The two men gave all their attention. And then Lucius's voice broke through its restraint. "Uncle Jack said I'd dig his grave, and I did. John Greer and I that is."

John Greer stood in the parlor, not uncertain but as if looking for the right hold, then stooping quickly to thrust his arms under the body as he would under a sack of cotton that has fallen over, lifting it in double strength to walk sideways towards the dining-room door and out. At his departure the sound of general movement in the parlor, the feeling of relief. And Ada and little Othel

slipping into the hall, and his mother for a moment remaining where she was, with her skirt around her rumpled and in disarray, very small, like a child abandoned by its playmates, until she saw the dark stain down the side of her garment. Leaning away from it, and so quickly it could not be seen how she did it, she was up looking towards the door into the hall. It closed with a quiet bang. His mother straightened, quivering. The three of them were all alone together.

And his mother's voice, the harsh violence of it, "Is that girl still in this room?"

He did not look at Ada Belle; he did not look anywhere. He put his arm about her waist. "This is my wife, mother."

It was as if the words, as slow as his voice, would never reach across the space which divided them. Then he saw his mother crumple standing up.

"Oh," she said. "Oh, no."

It was a wail whispering. The very nails of the house shivered. He had heard, not from Jack's lips but from hers, the final expulsion of breath. There was nothing more now to receive from or give the dead. Its spasm had made its last contraction, and life was there, forsaken and forsaking. In the blankness of his feeling, before the wash of grief could come and go, he understood this, that he could not flee it; only accept and bear it.

"Duncan. Duncan," his mother whispered.

And he, with a return of feeling, "Mother, this is not Duncan. This is Lucius. Your son, Lucius."

"I know you are Lucius," she said fretfully. She passed her hand across her brow. "I must help John Greer. You will excuse me."

He crossed over and put his hand under his mother's elbow. "No, no," she said. "Your place is with your wife," and walked away from him.

He turned suddenly to Mr. Legrand. "If I had only said, when I came in, We are married. But I had to tell what a man I was first, what . . ." He dropped his head to hide his face.

The older man did not answer for a while. "You mustn't blame

yourself, Lucius. These things, we don't know all that goes into making them happen. Nobody's at fault."

At last he looked up. He was thankful that Mr. Legrand was intent upon the men at work. The log fell in two, and the sawyers lifted the saw; remained kneeling a moment; slowly rose and went forward to the next cut. They wiped their hands and the saw swung above the bark and, descending, began to bite into the next cut.

"I didn't think at first, Lucius, you were doing the right thing, moving out here. But there are times when everybody has to get off by himself. Take stock. And you and your wife . . ."

"Yes, sir. I thought we could . . . and get the timber cut."

"You'll be right on hand to look after things."

"Yes, sir."

"Your mother came downstairs this morning."

Politely, "How is she, sir?"

"Well. Well, she looks older." Mr. Legrand turned and waited for Lucius to speak, but he could not free himself from watching the sawdust fall down the curves of the log. "You must come to see her," Mr. Legrand said formally.

"Yes, sir. I will. I will later."

"Whenever you feel you can get away. Jack's death will bring us all together. Your mother mentioned it might be well for your Cousin Charles to teach Ada Belle her letters. I think that's a good sign, don't you?"

Lucius made no reply.

"Well, I'd better be getting back," Mr. Legrand said, with false energy.

"I'll go as far as the buggy with you."

They walked along not speaking, and suddenly were out of the trees. The pace increased as they passed into and beyond the now empty yard. Old Peter was tinkering about the mill. This afternoon they would begin to saw up the boundary tree. John Henry was already getting up steam. He had made up his mind to watch the cutting. It seemed strange to him that he had no feeling whatever about it. That was the strangest thing of all.

They approached the brand-new buggy, the sleek horse tied to a sapling. Mr. Legrand went forward to untie the halter. He paused. "I know you are bewildered, son. I hope you don't mind me calling you son?" he said hurriedly.

"No, sir." If only he would hurry up and leave.

"Thank you. Jack's death has given you, all of us, a lot of sympathy. Judge Ewing has put Othel in the asylum. I'd forgotten. That's one thing I came out here to tell you. And Laird Percy has lost his first gatekeeper. I got him to take Ada. I stopped by and told her she would have to move right away."

Lucius bowed his head.

Mr. Legrand now turned and squared himself. He began as a man who will say it out. "I used to think money could do anything. I've learned a lot. I kept with me for years the thought that you were my son, and who can tell when it comes so close together and it's all in the dark? Don't be offended. What I'm saying is that I have my small sorrow too. To know and not to know." Then he said more firmly, "You and Joe Cree were father and son for eighteen years. Don't give that up. We both have got to live with that, and I have to . . . never mind, but a child may have different kinds of parents, so . . ."

"Yes, sir."

Pete Legrand undid the halter and got in the buggy. He picked up the lines. "One more thing. Money can help. I'm always behind you."

"I know, sir."

Mr. Legrand cleared his throat. "Is there anything you want to say to your mother?"

Lucius looked down at the toe of his boot. "Tell her. Well, tell her."

"I will. I'll stop by Jack's house. Ada Belle will want to know when you are coming in."

Now Lucius raised his head. "It will be after dark. Tell her that. Sometime after dark."

Mr. Legrand nodded and clucked to the horse. The buggy turned and he, erect over his slight stoop, rode away. Lucius watched him until the buggy bounced out of sight in the narrow way through the trees and brush. Slowly he turned back to the day's work, over the rough yard, towards the woods. He would watch every log cut and later, every board fall from the saw. And these boards he would take to raise a small house to bring his wife to. For the first time since he'd come back to the woods, he felt his step lighten. Here he would begin again; he had Jack's words to stand on. In time they would turn to knowledge; in time maybe they would. He could hope now, even if the hope was raw. . . .

Sol Leatherbury speaks to himself, in the woods:

The tree
It won't be no tree long
The tree what killed Captain Cree.
Lucius let it lay, but he seen his mistake.
Hit is damaged some. Hit lay out too long.
He shows little kin to Captain Cree.
A boy who hones to live in a coffin.
And with a Rutter. That's a puzzle now.
But the tree will make sound boards.
Full of pinholes, but a pinworm damages little.
The boards will cut wide. It won't take many.
They'll make a tight shelter.
Tight enough to hold a Rutter.
A Rutter aint used to much.
Lucius now. He don't ask for much,
And he aint got much.
But the boards is sound
Sound enough for him
Aer a Rutter.
The boards is.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, in 1902 on land given by his Revolutionary ancestor to found the town, Andrew Nelson Lytle lived there and in North Alabama until at the age of thirteen he went to the Sewanee Military Academy. Afterwards he spent a year in France studying, was admitted to Exeter College, Oxford, but was called home on the death of his grandfather.

He graduated from Vanderbilt in 1925. Here he met and became friends with the poets and others who showed him his true occupation, which at first he thought was the theatre. After managing a cotton farm for his father, he spent two years under George Pierce Baker in the Yale School of Drama; supported himself in New York acting, as he began the research on his first book, a Civil War biography, *BEDFORD FORREST AND HIS CRITTER COMPANY*.

Returning to Tennessee, he renewed his fellowship with the writers about Vanderbilt who at the moment were taking a fresh look at their common historic inheritance. He contributed to their agrarian symposium, *I'll Take My Stand*. He began writing fiction and found this, rather than the theatre, to be his proper art form. He has written stories and four novels: *The Long Night* (1936); *At the Moon's Inn* (1941); *A Name For Evil* (1947); and the present book.

He has taught history in Southwestern College and at the University of the South, where for a year he edited the oldest American literary quarterly, *The Sewanee Review*. Then he farmed and wrote, but discovered the two were incompatible and taught two terms in the writing program at the University of Iowa. Since 1948 he has been lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Florida in Gainesville. He has received several literary awards, a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Kenyon Fellowship for fiction. He has done certain critical essays on fiction and history.

He is married and has three daughters.

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